

Contesting danger: a new agenda for policy and scholarship on Central Asia

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It is the received wisdom of policy, journalistic and entertainment communities, as well as much of the academic world of area studies, that Central Asia is a source and site of particular dangers. As a consequence of this widespread belief among opinion-formers, Central Asia has become embedded in western public consciousnesses, particularly in English-speaking countries, as a place of great insecurity, terrorism and Islamism, where violent political conflict is ever ready to erupt. However, our research and experience of living in the post-Soviet parts of Central Asia has led us to rather different conclusions. Indeed a considerable amount of fieldwork and several interpretative studies conducted in and on Central Asia in recent years paint a more complicated picture of danger and its various lived realities in the region. This article thus contends that it is time the preconceptions and oversights of this discourse of danger were exposed.

The question we address in this article is: 'How, why, and to what effect is Central Asia imagined in popular, scholarly and official contexts as a particular locus of danger?' Our answer identifies and explores a discourse of danger that makes the region knowable to western publics, academic communities and officials. We contend that the contents of much international policy and practice, news and current affairs writing, documentaries and films, and even academic studies of security, conflict and international affairs in Central Asia are not the results of an impartial search for the facts. Rather, their claims and contentions are derived in accordance with a preconceived and self-referential discourse of danger which identifies threats to us while ignoring insecurity as it is experienced by Central Asian communities.

This article explores the way in which Central Asia is written into global space as the object of multiple and intersecting formal, practical and popular geopolitical discourses which imagine and inscribe it as a particular locus of danger. The task of such geopolitical analysis is important for two reasons. First, although these links are poorly understood, the way that people—embedded in organizational structures and as individuals—think about certain places affects the way

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they act towards them. Thus the discursive environment shapes policy-making and political choices towards and within the region, so that the western discourse of danger itself endangers Central Asia. Second, this assumption of danger has profound implications for the kinds of academic research that get funded and published. The study of Central Asia is, to some degree, being shaped by assumptions of danger and the simplistic analysis that often masquerades as the evidential basis for these assumptions.

The article presents a challenge to this western geopolitical vision of Central Asia. It is also a call to our colleagues in Central Asian studies to challenge the unstated assumptions, distortions and oversights of much security and conflict analysis on the region. It proceeds in four parts. First, we introduce the theoretical lens through which we view this debate, critical geopolitics, and outline the debate on danger in Central Asia. We identify three dimensions of endangerment, three characteristics attributed to Central Asia in geopolitical discourse: Central Asia as *obscure*, *oriental* and *fractious*. In the second part we first consider how the popular US TV drama about presidential politics, *The West Wing*, characterizes the region as *obscure*. In the third, we examine how Washington's foreign policy discourse scripts the region as *oriental*. In the fourth, we explore how academic, development, cinematic and televisual discourses conceive of Central Asia as *fractious* due to the putatively inherent nature of its ethnic and political geography. Finally, we test the thesis by asking whether it is disproved by the Osh catastrophe of 2010, and by showing how the discourse of danger frames policies and practices of conflict resolution and international aid that themselves endanger the region. We conclude by highlighting the discursive economy of danger that has emerged and how it can be contested by policy-makers, journalists and academics who are attentive to alternative local narratives of danger and the wider global economic processes which are transforming society and economy in Central Asia.

Endangering space

Geopolitics is the study of how 'The world is actively spatialised, divided up, labelled, sorted out into a hierarchy of places of greater or lesser "importance" by political geographers, other academics and political leaders.'¹ *Classical geopolitics* assumes that the physical geography of the world significantly determines the course of human history.² The trained expert can uncover this framework within which international relations occur, and thus come to understand the dangers posed to his or her state and advise on actions to counter them. *Critical geopolitics*, on the other hand, denaturalizes the global order by portraying it as socially and historically constructed.³ It does this through an 'examination of the geographical assumptions, designations, and understandings that enter into the making of

¹ John Agnew, *Geopolitics: re-visioning world politics* (London: Routledge, 2003).

² Mark Polelle, *Raising cartographic consciousness: the social and foreign policy vision of geopolitics in the twentieth century* (Oxford: Lexington, 1999).

³ E. Jeffrey Popke, 'Recasting geopolitics: the discursive scripting of the International Monetary Fund', *Political Geography* 13: 3, 1994, pp. 255–69 at p. 255.

world politics',⁴ exploring how 'descriptions of places and people are stitched together to narrate and "explain" events'.⁵ It does not deny that the world is a dangerous place for many people, but emphasizes the enquiry into how, why and with what effects certain places become understood as dangerous.

Critical geopolitics contends that geopolitics is more than the 'formal' writings of academic geopolitical experts, encompassing the 'practical' geopolitical discourses of bodies such as foreign policy think-tanks and government bureaucracies, and the 'popular' geopolitical ideas encountered in the mass media, films, novels, television documentaries and the like. As Ó Tuathail and Dalby contend, in tracing out this threefold scheme, 'Geopolitics saturates the everyday life of nations.'⁶ It is not simply that popular and practical geopolitical representations supplement the formal scripts of political geographers and international relations scholars but that there is considerable overlap and interplay between these three modes of discourse. Critical geopolitical analysis therefore explores the production, distribution and consumption of understandings and representations of danger within and between these sites. In this article we use this approach to explore the way in which Central Asia is written into global space as the object of multiple and intersecting formal, practical and popular geopolitical discourses which imagine and inscribe it as a particular locus of danger.

Debating danger in Central Asia

Although this article focuses on recent geopolitical imaginations, we contend that danger has long been one of the pre-eminent lenses through which Central Asia has been made knowable to Europeans and North Americans. An unknown and unaligned Central Asia was seen as a potential danger to expanding British and Russian imperial power in the nineteenth century, configuring what is commonly termed 'the Great Game': a complex competition for knowledge about and influence over the region.⁷ Danger did not subside with conquest. Morrison argues that the victorious tsarist Russians' policies towards their newly acquired territories in Central Asia were influenced by an 'exaggerated dread of a Muslim revolt'.⁸ The idea that Central Asia presented an enduring danger to Moscow was repeated in dominant western literatures on the region during the Cold War. Scholars found in latent Turkic national pride the 'firmest and surest refuge' against Soviet attempts to remake the region.⁹ Because Soviet Central

⁴ Agnew, *Geopolitics*, p. 5.

⁵ Klaus Dodds, 'Geopolitics in the Foreign Office: British representations of Argentina 1945–1961', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 19: 3, 1994, pp. 273–90 at p. 276.

⁶ Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby, 'Introduction: rethinking geopolitics: towards a critical geopolitics', in Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby, eds, *Rethinking geopolitics* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 5.

⁷ Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: the struggle for empire in Central Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Robert Johnson, *Spying for empire: the Great Game in Central and south Asia, 1757–1947* (London: Greenhill, 2006).

⁸ Alexander Morrison, *Russian rule in Samarkand, 1868–1910: a comparison with British India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 87.

⁹ Gavin Hambly, with Alexandre Bennigsen, David Bivar, Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, Mahin Hajianpur, Alastair Lamb, Chantal Lemerrier-Quelquejay and Richard Pierce, *Central Asia* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969), pp. 241–2.

Asia experienced 'the failed transformation',¹⁰ the region maintained an inherent antagonism to Moscow and posed an 'Islamic threat to the Soviet state'.¹¹

With the collapse of the USSR, western Cold War Sovietological knowledge of Central Asia was superseded by 1990s 'transitology'. Notwithstanding the 'failed transformation' of the Soviet period, this paradigm assumed that the newly independent Central Asian republics were making a 'transition' to western-style democratic market capitalism. It was nonetheless haunted by the fear that this normative shift to the western model was endangered. Fuller, for example, wrote that the US was concerned that the region might become 'the breeding ground of civil war, nuclear proliferation, radical Islamic movements, a battleground for Asian geopolitics, an ecological wasteland, an economic basket case, or the target of a resurgent Russian imperial vision'.¹² The ethnic violence in the region during the late Soviet period and the Tajik civil war seemed to confirm these fears and led to analysis of the region within a conflict prevention and peacebuilding framework, as epitomized by the Center for Preventive Action (CPA) study for the Council on Foreign Relations, *Calming the Ferghana Valley*.¹³ Thus, although political control of the region has shifted, it has been consistently written into western geopolitical imaginations as a place of danger.

The challenge to the reading of Central Asia's conflict potential that we will detail below was begun by scholars who have engaged seriously with critical studies of international relations and geopolitics. Building on pioneering work by Bichel,¹⁴ in a 2000 review essay on *Calming the Ferghana Valley* Megoran criticized the CPA project for its superficial analysis and methodological deficiencies.¹⁵ Other scholars, many drawing from the same theoretical stream, joined the debate. Torjesen and MacFarlane's study of small arms in Kyrgyzstan questioned the founding assumption that small arms proliferation was a challenge for Central Asia, giving empirical evidence indicating popular opposition to the display and use of small arms and highlighting the lack of evidence for significant levels of trafficking.¹⁶ A more comprehensive reappraisal of conflict prevention and peacebuilding work in the region subsequently came in Heathershaw and Torjesen's special issue of *Central Asian Survey*, 'Discourses of danger in Central Asia'.¹⁷ Contributors highlighted the lack of empirical evidence for claims made about danger by various regional and international peacebuilders and conflict preventers. In response, they

¹⁰ William Fierman, ed., *Soviet Central Asia: the failed transformation* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991).

¹¹ Alexandre Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *The Islamic threat to the Soviet state* (London: Croom Helm, 1983).

¹² Graham Fuller, 'Central Asia: the quest for identity', *Current History* 93: 582, 1994, pp. 145–9 at p. 149.

¹³ Barnett Rubin and Nancy Lubin, *Calming the Ferghana Valley: development and dialogue in the heart of Central Asia*, report of the Ferghana Valley Working Group of the Centre for Preventive Action (New York: Century Foundation, 1999).

¹⁴ Anthony Bichel, 'Contending theories of Central Asia: the virtual realities of realism, critical IR and the internet', PhD diss., University of Hawaii, 1997.

¹⁵ Nick Megoran, 'Calming the Ferghana Valley experts: a review essay of *Calming the Ferghana Valley: development and dialogue in the heart of Central Asia*, by Nancy Lubin, Barnett Rubin and the Centre for Preventive Action, New York: The Century Foundation Press, 1999', *Central Asia Monitor* 2000: 5, 2000, pp. 20–25.

¹⁶ Stina Torjesen and S. Neil MacFarlane, *Kyrgyzstan: a small arms anomaly in Central Asia?* Small Arms Survey occasional paper (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2004).

¹⁷ John Heathershaw and Stina Torjesen, eds, 'Discourses of danger in Central Asia', *Central Asian Survey* 24: 1, 2005, pp. 1–96.

introduced evidence of the coping mechanisms and social solidarities fostered by seasonal labour migration,¹⁸ the conflict avoidance tactics such as ‘gender masks’ used by ordinary people,¹⁹ and the control mechanisms often used successfully by regimes, for example to limit the availability of small arms.²⁰ ‘Danger’, they argued, is discursively constructed. Subsequent research monographs by Bichsel and Heathershaw have explored in more detail how ‘danger’ is constructed and maintained in western geopolitical discourses and practices.²¹ These constructions of danger have inadvertent effects in practice and, moreover, stand in marked contrast to Central Asian citizens’ experiences of insecurity.

In 2007 this challenge received a response from the conflict prevention community in a special issue of *Communism and Post-Communism*, ‘Conflicts in Central Asia’, edited by Sandole and Korostelina of George Mason University. The issue included a number of studies from a conflict analysis perspective that explored the potential for violence in the region. Korostelina, for example, provided a balanced and extremely wide-ranging analysis of conflict potential in Tajikistan, arguing that ‘the collectivist culture of Tajikistan is more prone to identity conflict’ while the ‘low level of intergroup prejudice reduces the possibility of tensions’.²² These general conclusions appear reasonable, but they remain based on an unremittingly broad and schematized conceptual framework while providing only very general and inconclusive evidence for conflict ‘potential’.²³ Nevertheless, in the conclusion to the issue Sandole states that the collection of papers reasserts the ‘real’ problems and ‘realities on the ground’ of Central Asia.²⁴ ‘To that extent’, he argues, ‘they have succeeded in countering the “discourse of danger” while, at the same time, pointing to areas of concern that should be addressed by appropriate actors within the five societies concerned, the immediate neighbourhood as well as by the “concerned international community”’.²⁵ His analysis provides a particular and determinist reading of conflict formation where poor education prompts migration which in turn generates family and social breakdown.²⁶ As a consequence, in Sandole’s account, migrants swell the ranks of “unofficial” political Islam’ to rebel against retrenched authoritarian regimes, thus having an impact on decisions made in the international ‘Great Game’ over Central Asia which serve to further exacerbate this rebellion and conflict. Islamic fundamentalism is predictably picked out as the primary cause of instability.²⁷

¹⁸ Saodat Olimova and Igor Bosc, *Labour migration from Tajikistan* (Dushanbe: International Organization for Migration/Sharq Scientific Research Center, 2003).

¹⁹ Colette Harris, *Control and subversion: gender relations in Tajikistan* (London: Pluto, 2004).

²⁰ Torjesen and MacFarlane, *Kyrgyzstan*; John Heathershaw, ‘The paradox of peacebuilding: peril, promise and small arms in Tajikistan’, *Central Asian Survey* 24: 1, 2005, pp. 21–38.

²¹ Christine Bichsel, *Conflict transformation in Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2009); John Heathershaw, *Post-conflict Tajikistan: the politics of peacebuilding and the emergence of legitimate order* (London: Routledge, 2009).

²² K. Korostelina, ‘The system of social identification in Tajikistan: early warning and conflict prevention’, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 40: 2, 2007, p. 235.

²³ Korostelina, ‘The system of social identification’, pp. 226, 236.

²⁴ Denis Sandole, ‘Central Asia: managing the delicate balance between the “discourse of danger”, the “Great Game” and regional problem solving’, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 40: 2, 2007, pp. 257–67.

²⁵ Sandole, ‘Central Asia’, pp. 260–61.

²⁶ Sandole, ‘Central Asia’, pp. 259–60.

²⁷ Sandole, ‘Central Asia’, pp. 260, 264.

The weakness of Sandole's account lies in his failure to acknowledge the role of interpretation (and, within that, predilections and presuppositions), which infers conflict potential from Central Asia's 'problems'. This is not to say that Central Asia does not face difficulties and insecurities; however, protagonists of the *discourse of danger* derive their claims and contentions in accordance with a preconceived and self-referential discourse of danger that identifies threats to westerners while failing to appreciate the insecurities that are felt and experienced by Central Asians.²⁸ The latter may relate less to the 'problems' identified by the discourse of danger than to the structural violence generated by capitalist restructuring and nationalist boundary-making.²⁹ Moreover, religious extremism (including Islamism), organized crime, illicit trafficking and home-grown terrorist plots are aspects of social life not only in Central Asia but in most parts of the world, including western states. The issue is the social and political significance of these activities—that is, how they are practised and institutionalized in daily life, how they are controlled or coopted by the state, and to what extent they foment conflict or cooperation in society. The deterministic reading proffered by Sandole, in which underdevelopment naturally leads to conflict, is not justified by the evidence and serves to muddy the waters further. Other analysts emphasize the relative weakness of Islamism in a region that remains a relatively barren ground for religious extremism and the relative lack of conflict between great powers in the so-called 'New Great Game'.³⁰

It is, then, a pre-existing geopolitical discourse of danger that provides the primary basis for Sandole's arguments. We turn now to outline the three dimensions of this discourse.

Obscuring space: the erasure of Central Asia in *The West Wing*

Obscure

1 dark, dim, gloomy, dismal;

2 not clear or plain to the mind; vague, uncertain; not easily understood; not clearly expressed.³¹

The first feature of the western geopolitical gaze that we identify is that of the obscure. Our use of this marker needs some clarification. Here we use 'obscurity' as a (negative) feature which is ascribed to Central Asia in popular and practical discourses where the near total knowledge of the limits and characteristics of space is assumed to be both attainable and desirable. That Central Asia, according to such analysis, is particularly distant, inaccessible and unintelligible itself presents a danger that must be guarded against.

²⁸ Heathershaw and Torjesen, 'Discourses of danger'.

²⁹ Nick Megoran, 'The critical geopolitics of the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan Fergana Valley boundary dispute, 1999–2000', *Political Geography* 23: 6, 2004, pp. 731–64.

³⁰ David Lewis, *The temptations of tyranny in Central Asia* (London: Hurst, 2008); Kathleen Collins and William Wohlforth, 'Central Asia: defying "Great Game" expectations', in R. J. Ellings and A. L. Friedberg, eds, *Strategic Asia 2003–2004: fragility and crisis* (Seattle, WA, and Washington DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2003), pp. 291–317.

³¹ *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*.

Central Asia's supposed obscurity is perhaps the most distinct feature of all geopolitical imaginings of the region generated by formal, practical or popular actors. This study affords little space to compare the obscurity inscribed to Central Asia to that apportioned to other regions of the world that are also considered distant or untamed. Suffice it to say that the earlier colonial discourses—often drawn on by the purveyors of western popular culture to represent a region—are, in the Central Asian case, marked by assumptions of distance, loss and unpredictability. The 'Great Game' evokes these features, particularly as republished accounts of British and Russian explorers are picked up in contemporary accounts of the 'New Great Game'.³² However, Central Asia remains especially distant as one of the few regions of the world where western colonies have never been established, and where debates over responsibility, racism and guilt have not been broached. It is thus especially important to study the means and ramifications of Central Asia's representation as a particularly obscure locus of danger and threat.

Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing* was an extremely popular and critically acclaimed television series, running from 1999 to 2006, which represented life in the fictional White House of President Jed Bartlett (played by Martin Sheen). Its audience, which reached 15–20 million at the height of its fame, was largely composed of the wealthy, professional, urban and 'liberal'.³³ Sorkin argues that in creating the series he sought to represent an idealized version of Washington politics for a learned audience.³⁴ Thus, *The West Wing* has been dismissed as 'The Left Wing' by some conservative commentators.³⁵ At the same time, the Bartlett White House's liberal idealism is contained within the parameters of a particular representation of the practical realities of American politics under the limits of the constitution, bureaucratic constraints, the separation of powers, a partisan party system and powerful special interests. This portrayal of the US government is credible if not realistic and is all the more important for its opinion-forming functions. As one analysis of *The West Wing* argues, 'popular culture matters and provides the basis of what many people believe about the world in which they live'.³⁶

The post-Soviet Central Asian states provide three storylines across the seven seasons of *The West Wing*. Two of these constitute sub-plots within single episodes, while the third—a major international armed conflict in Kazakhstan—is a significant narrative running through the final season. In addition to these three plotlines there are a few passing mentions of Central Asian states. Without exception these depictions are consistent with a general portrayal of Central Asia in *The West Wing* as obscure, uncertain and thus dangerous. What each of these representations of

³² Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The grand chessboard: American primacy and its geostrategic imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); S. Frederick Starr, 'Making Eurasia stable', *Foreign Affairs* 75: 1, 1996, pp. 80–92. For a discussion see Matthew Edwards, 'The New Great Game and the new great gamers: disciples of Kipling and Mackinder', *Central Asian Survey* 22: 1, 2003, pp. 83–102.

³³ L. Elber, "'West Wing' at ratings crossroads', Associated Press, 22 Oct. 2002, <http://www.b4a.healthyinterest.net/news/000172.html>, accessed 31 July 2009.

³⁴ Interview with Aaron Sorkin, Season 1, DVD box-set special feature.

³⁵ Stephen Armstrong, 'The war on culture', *New Statesman*, 21 May, <http://www.newstatesman.com/arts-and-culture/2007/05/west-wing-sorkin-television>, accessed 31 July 2009.

³⁶ Simon Philpott and David Mutimer, 'Inscribing the American body politic: Martin Sheen and two American decades', *Geopolitics* 10, 2005, p. 338.

the region shows is that uncertainty and obscurity have specific ramifications for how we imagine policy and practice towards Central Asia.

Central Asia's first appearance in *The West Wing* is found in 'The Leadership Breakfast' (season 2, episode 11, first broadcast on 10 January 2001), where the failure of an otherwise extremely knowledgeable character, Sam Seaborn (Rob Lowe), in conversation with a powerful columnist, to distinguish between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (and the latter's putative nuclear arsenal), leads to embarrassment. Sam later realizes his mistake in discussion with a colleague, Donna Moss (Janel Moloney), and is clearly crestfallen:

Sam: Kyrgyzstan's on the side of a hill near China and has mostly nomads and sheep.

Donna: Well maybe there are nuclear weapons in Kyrgyzstan.

Sam: There are barely pots and pans in Kyrgyzstan.

The confusion later in the episode turns farcical as Sam asks Donna, when she meets the columnist at an art gallery later in the week, to drop into the conversation that he had obviously meant Kazakhstan.

On the one hand, of course, this comic sub-plot is merely light relief alongside the tension of serious matters of state and international affairs. On the other hand, we suggest that it is no coincidence that it is Central Asia that proves beyond the limits of even Sam Seaborn's knowledge. Post-Soviet Central Asia is consistently represented by journalists, commentators, travel writers and filmmakers as 'lost', 'unexplored' or 'distant'. This treatment of Central Asia as a popular geopolitical object is hugely important. In that it is naturally mistaken or misunderstood, Central Asia remains in tension with modern international and geopolitical discourses that demand intelligible and fixed boundaries, insides and outsides. Central Asia's failure, from this perspective, to abide by these certainties of the modern age enables its actors and institutions to be diminished and discounted: Central Asia is written and read as an opponent to our ideals, but an opponent whose character remains indistinct. This othering situates the region on the fringes—'on the side of a hill', without 'pots and pans'—and thus geostrategically unimportant.

The apparent obscurity of Central Asia is particularly pronounced in its second significant appearance in *The West Wing* (season 6, episode 3, first broadcast 1 November 2004), entitled 'Third Day Story', where the government of Turkmenistan is treated as a Scaramouche figure, seeking to scupper US attempts to organize a peacekeeping mission. Amid lots of jokes regarding the apparent idiosyncrasies of real-life President Niyazov's cult of personality, the Turkmen government is easily dismissed and ultimately circumvented by the White House. Here, as is true across all treatments of the region in *The West Wing*, no recognizably Central Asian characters actually feature in an episode in which Central Asia is represented, a feature termed by Bichel 'the cinematic erasure of Central Asia'.³⁷

³⁷ Anthony Bichel, 'Air Force One: the cinematic erasure of Central Asia', *Central Asia Monitor* 2, 1998, pp. 6–19. *The West Wing* is not exceptional in being a TV serial drama in which occasional episodes foreground danger emanating from a thinly depicted Central Asia. Other examples are *The Agency* (CBS, 24 Feb. 2003) and *Spooks* (BBC1, 18 Oct. 2004), episodes of TV serial dramas about counterterrorist operations against mainland threats

According to this vision, however exotic and intriguing they may prove as dinner-time conversation topics, Central Asians can often be dismissed as inexplicable and idiosyncratic when it comes to matters of real geopolitics.

The distinct lack of Central Asian characters and agendas is continued in the third and much longer regional storyline, which takes place across most of *The West Wing's* final season. But while Central Asia itself remains distant and indistinct, its danger to the West becomes pronounced. Broadcast in 2005–2006, these episodes feature a plot to assassinate the fictional President Isatov of Kazakhstan (once again mistaken at first, this time for Uzbekistan) and a regional oil company head which leads to a rigged election, civil conflict ('the Kazakh people are rioting in the streets because they've been screwed out of an election') and the invasion of the country by China and Russia (a 'war over oil'). The two Great Powers are kept apart only by a massive American intervention of around 150,000 troops. As C. J. Cregg (Allison Janney, who plays White House chief of staff) comments, 'I'm trying to keep China and Russia from annihilating the Northern Hemisphere over oil in Kazakhstan.'

This 'New Great Game' plotline is fascinating in that it shows how an obscure or unknown Central Asia is made known in terms of established international and geopolitical dogmas of national security and conflict resolution. The assigned roles of the protagonists reflect the key tenets of geopolitical thinking in the West.³⁸ China and Russia are inscribed as essentially conflicting powers competing over finite and scarce resources.³⁹ The United States, meanwhile, is portrayed as having its own alternative set of interests but is also assigned the benign personality of a normative actor in the role of third-party peacemaker. National elites remain in the shadows, corrupted and controlled by great powers, and completely indifferent to the rights and welfare of their peoples. Finally, the peoples of Central Asia remain hidden from view and inscribed with the imagined universal human desire for political transition to democracy. The evident geopolitical significance of Central Asia—a clear and present danger to the West—is somewhat in contrast with the rendering of confusion, distance and even absence found in the previous two examples. However, in deploying this 'New Great Game' storyline *The West Wing* writers highlight how an obscure Central Asia can spring incredible surprises on the West. Moreover, while this plotline might not be accepted in the imperative sense—not least because the apparent obscurity of Central Asia makes it unthinkable to all but the most hyperbolic of New Great Gamers that the United States could be involved in a war there—it can be seen as indicative and, to some extent, constitutive of the western geopolitical imaginary. The roles inscribed in the storyline are not at all dissimilar to the roles identified in the geopolitical scripting of

originating in Central Asia conducted by the US and UK secret services respectively. In the former, the only Central Asians who feature are terrorists in Tashkent and a prostitute who makes a cameo appearance in Washington.

³⁸ See section below on 'Orientalizing space'.

³⁹ China's role is a variation on Great Game thinking in that it is assigned a pro-democracy position brought about by the inclusion of ethnic Chinese pro-democracy movements and 'Chinese enclaves' in Kazakhstan. However, this position is represented as derivative of wider geopolitical interests which themselves are determined by a need to secure supplies of oil.

the region by the western press during the two most prominent political events of 2005, Kyrgyzstan's 'Tulip revolution' and Uzbekistan's 'Andijon massacre'. Both events were widely and spuriously interpreted in the press as popular struggles for democracy repressed by authoritarian governments and disregarded in great power politics despite superficial western pressure for reform. In that Central Asia is an obscure and uncertain place it presents dangers towards which western powers remain indifferent, understandably but at their peril.

Orientalizing space: Washingtonian security analysis

Oriental:

1 belonging to or situated in the eastern part of the sky.⁴⁰

The second feature of geopolitical discourse on Central Asia is that of the oriental other. Orientalism has long genealogical roots that are inextricably intertwined with experiences of colonialism, particularly in the Middle East.⁴¹ Myer has shown how western Sovietological writing on Central Asia orientalized the subject specifically in terms of a colonized people—albeit represented as fractious subjects rather than passive recipients of imperial largesse.⁴² The narrative of Sovietological writing is problematic, as is now widely acknowledged, given the often simplistic assumptions of a pre-Soviet, traditional and Asiatic people conquered and subordinated by European masters. However, the new-found concern of some parts of the academy with post-colonial complexity has not precluded orientalist representations of Central Asia in popular culture, policy formulation and practice, and even certain 'policy-relevant' academic circles. Today, the Asianness of Central Asia is understood internationally in terms of the maxims of the 'war on terror'.

In this section of the article we will argue that, since gaining independence from the Soviet Union, Central Asian states have been increasingly represented as comparable with their neighbours to the south, in particular Afghanistan and Pakistan, rather than to their European former Soviet compatriots. We make this point by exploring the writings of a Washington-based community of security analysts who are part of, or act as consultants for, US defence establishments. These writings correlate with broader academic debates about the regional framing of Central Asia, and the development of cartographic visions of Asia as threatening. We will argue that international security discourse on the five post-Soviet states orientalizes them as prone to 'Afghanization' and as an extension of the wider region of the Middle East and/or Asia.

The region's significance for international security derives from a spatial imagination and territorial reasoning that situate Central Asia on the 'front line' with Afghanistan, and even as part of the same region.⁴³ Such accounts identify Central

⁴⁰ *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁴¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

⁴² William Myer, *Islam and colonialism: western perspectives on Soviet Asia* (London: Routledge/Curzon, 2002).

⁴³ S. Neil MacFarlane, 'The United States and regionalism in Central Asia', *International Affairs* 80: 3, May 2004, pp. 447–61; Fiona Hill, 'The United States and Russia in Central Asia: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran', paper produced for the Aspen Institute Congressional Program, Aug. 2002, p. 17; Elizabeth

Asia as an especially perilous and porous region of the world. In respect of its link to the south, it is described by the head of the Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College as a 'key theatre in the war on terror',⁴⁴ which according to Giragosian, 'has acquired a new strategic relevance'.⁴⁵ This coming together of South Asia and Central Asia is not merely a matter of military logistics but one of the region's geopolitical character.

The coupling of South Asia and Central Asia in US foreign policy is thus about more than the consequences of the Afghanistan intervention and the use of bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. A pre-existing conception of Central Asia as essentially Asiatic and anti-Soviet has combined with the tumult of events since 9/11 to link Central Asia with Afghanistan in the structure of American foreign and defence policy-making. According to Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Elizabeth Jones, 'since 9/11 US strategic interests in the region have focused on anti-terrorism, especially the elimination of terrorist and other destabilising groups'.⁴⁶ This led to a massive increase in the US strategic role following 9/11 in the establishment of the Ganci (Manas) and Kharshi-Khanabad military bases, and overflight rights across Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Hill notes: 'The primary American interest is in security, in preventing the "Afghanicisation" of Central Asia and the spawning of more terrorist groups with transnational reach that can threaten the stability of the interlocking regions and strike the United States.'⁴⁷ Such thinking has even contributed to an internal reorganization of the US State Department. By late 2005, Jones's department of European and Eurasian Affairs had lost responsibility for the region, which had been incorporated into a South and Central Asian section. This shift was foreshadowed by the moving of the Central Asian region from the Pentagon's Atlantic Command to its Central Command (CENTCOM) in October 1999. In itself this bureaucratic change reflects US thinking about Central Asia as a region apart from other former Soviet Slavic states, thinking that may be rooted in Sovietological conceptions of the Russian/Soviet empire. Further research would need to be conducted to establish the role of discourse alongside bureaucratic, technical or logistical factors that may have combined in bringing about this shift. However, there is no question that this geopolitical conception both predates the shift and has subsequently helped justify it. It is easier, for example, to understand why Washington-based analysts may believe Russia's role in the region is decreasing and peripheral if they see Central Asian states as more culturally and politically akin to Pakistan or Afghanistan than to Belarus or Georgia.⁴⁸

This geopolitical coupling of Central Asian states with Pakistan and Afghanistan has an important corollary in academic debates about the 'regionness' of

Wishnick, ed., *Strategic consequences of the Iraq War: US security interests in Central Asia reassessed* (Carlisle, PN: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2004).

⁴⁴ Douglas Lovelace, 'Foreword', in Wishnick, ed., *Strategic consequences*, p. iii.

⁴⁵ Richard Giragosian, 'The strategic Central Asian arena', *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 4: 1, 2006, p. 133.

⁴⁶ Paraphrasing of Jones's testimony in Wishnick, ed., *Strategic consequences*, p. 4.

⁴⁷ Hill, 'The United States', p. 18.

⁴⁸ Henry Plater-Zyberk, *Tajikistan: waiting for a storm?*, Central Asia series (London: Conflict Studies Research Centre, no. 13, May 2004).

Central Asia, with some arguing that Central Asia should be coupled with Europe as part of Eurasia and others emphasizing its oriental or Asian location. For the editors of the journal *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, the idea of Eurasia stresses the region's commonalities with Russia and post-socialist states in Europe. For advocates of the doctrine of Eurasianism, the region is essentially linked to Russia and Siberia as the heir of a unique civilizational destiny that is neither properly Asian nor properly European.⁴⁹ Schoeberlein's 'Central Eurasia' strips the region of most of Eurasia's European space, adding Afghanistan and Iran.⁵⁰ Starr prefers the label 'Greater Central Asia'.⁵¹ Amineh's 'Greater Middle East' goes further, cleaving Turkestan from Russia and viewing it as part of a region that encompasses the Middle East, North Africa and part of South Asia.⁵² These positions all have academic and/or political premises, agendas and implications, and they are significant for our purposes here in that they make claims for the extent of Central Asia's Asian-ness.

In Washingtonian security analysis, claims based on cultural–historical affinities are buttressed by considerations to do with present security environments. For Thomas Barnett, Professor of Warfare Analysis at the US Naval War College, Central Asia is part of a 'non-integrating gap' (including most of Africa, the Middle East, South America and Pakistan/Afghanistan, but not Russia or Europe), that is dangerous to the 'core' of globalization because of its disconnectedness from it.⁵³ For Chris Seiple, director of the Washington think-tank the Institute for Global Engagement, using an expression coined by former US Secretary of State Zbigniew Brzezinski and popularized in a famous cover of *Time* magazine, Central Asia sits 'atop the crescent of crisis that rises from North Africa to Central Asia before descending into Southeast Asia'.⁵⁴ In a similar vein, former US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld identified a 'broad arc of instability that stretches from the Middle East to Northeast Asia' and threatens critical US interests.⁵⁵ The affiliation of these writers is significant, illustrating the circulation of ideas between governmental and non-governmental institutions. These ways of knowing Central Asia are also important because, whether on cultural–historical or contemporary security grounds, they detach Central Asia from its post-Soviet spatialization and attach it firmly to Asia. Moreover, in keeping with this orientaling move, these authors represent the Central Asian republics as dangerous. As we shall consider below, this has important policy implications.

⁴⁹ Graham Smith, 'The masks of Proteus: Russia, geopolitical shift and the new Eurasianism', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24, 1999, pp. 481–500; O. A. Donskikh, 'Eurasianism as a concept and as an instrument for the formation of geopolitical doctrines and strategies', in *Siberia in focus: proceedings of the conference 'Eurasia: regional perspectives'*, June 2–3, 2007, Novosibirsk (Kolkata: Towards Freedom), pp. 93–101.

⁵⁰ John Schoeberlein, 'Setting the stakes of a new society', *Central Eurasian Studies Review* 1: 1, 2002, pp. 4–8.

⁵¹ S. Frederick Starr, *In defence of Greater Central Asia* (Washington DC: Johns Hopkins University, Silk Road Studies Programme, Sept. 2008).

⁵² M. Parvizi Amineh, ed., *The Greater Middle East in global politics: social science perspectives on the changing geography of the world politics, international studies in sociology and social anthropology* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

⁵³ Thomas Barnett, *The Pentagon's new map: war and peace in the twenty-first century* (New York: Berkeley, 2004).

⁵⁴ Chris Seiple, 'Uzbekistan: civil society in the heartland', *Orbis* 49: 2, Spring, 2005, pp. 245–59 at p. 246.

⁵⁵ Donald Rumsfeld, *Annual Report to the President and to Congress* (Washington DC: Department of Defense, 2002), http://www.nti.org/e_research/official_docs/dod/2002/81502DOD.pdf, accessed July 2009, p. 11.

These examples demonstrate that the process of coupling Central Asia with its southern neighbours is not a natural and expected outcome of the fall of the Soviet Union. Rather, it is a western social construction, constituted via political discourses and acts, which affects American strategic positions and policies towards the region. This geopolitical conception is contested in many ways in local popular and elite discourses. Public opinion surveys in Central Asian states consistently show greater trust in Russia than in the United States. Twenty-first-century labour migration flows have reconnected Central Asia to Russia to an extent not seen since mass Central Asian male conscription into the Soviet armed forces, and it is to Russia that thousands of Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks have fled for refuge since the violence in the south of the country that began in June 2010. Similarly, Central Asian elite conceptions of their affinity with Europe meant that the announcement of the reorganization of the State Department in 2005 was greeted with perplexity and disdain by some analysts in the region.⁵⁶ That post-Soviet Central Asian regimes are now more often compared with Afghanistan than Belarus is not natural; and, from the perspective of our view of the modern social and political history of the region, and the perspectives of many within the region, it is difficult to understand.

Fractionous space: representing ethnic conflict in the Ferghana Valley

Fractionous

1 Accompanied by breakage or rupture of par;

2 Refractory, unruly; quarrelsome; ...⁵⁷

We identify as a third dimension of endangerment the representation of Central Asia as *fractionous*, and thus both dangerous to the West and in need of reconstruction. The term 'fractionous' evokes domesticity, suggesting local or internal rather than global or external conflict. The rendering of Central Asia as obscure, oriental *and* fractionous makes it possible for the region to be regarded as dangerous but disregarded with indifference. In this section we will consider how this characterization works in relation to the question of nation-state formation in post-Soviet Central Asia. We concentrate on the perceived threats emanating from two supposed sites of fractionousness in the Ferghana Valley: interethnic conflict and interstate boundary disputes.

In the Ferghana Valley of 1990s Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, transi-tologists (see above) particularly feared that the region would be torn apart by ethnic conflict. Identifying what they posited as 'the ethnic basis of the new Central Asian countries',⁵⁸ they assumed that massively violent ethnic clashes were 'likely to increase in frequency and intensity'.⁵⁹ This view was premised

⁵⁶ Interview conducted by one of the authors with Rashid Abdullo, independent political analyst, in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, June 2005.

⁵⁷ *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁵⁸ Ralph S. Clem, 'The new Central Asia: prospects for development', in Michael J. Bradshaw, ed., *Geography and transition in the post-Soviet republics* (Chichester: Wiley, 1997), pp. 171–2.

⁵⁹ Robert Kaiser, *The geography of nationalism in Russia and the USSR* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 370–71.

upon the assumption that 'ethnicity' was a tangible force that overrode any other social element in mapping out the contours of possible futures. These formulations lacked both any attempt to theorize 'ethnicity' and any solid empirical basis in research. Rather, they almost without exception relied upon a particularly problematic reading of a number of violent incidents in late Soviet Central Asia. Most significant of these were the June 1990 clashes between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the Uzgen and Osh regions of southern Kyrgyzstan.⁶⁰ These incidents were taken as examples of the 'ethnic discord' which allegedly 'has always been a major feature of the Central Asian landscape'.⁶¹ More significantly, it was widely assumed that because of these 'tensions',⁶² 'Central Asia is sure to pass through a chaotic phase of self-assertion of its peoples' identities'.⁶³

This 'ethnic conflict' reading of Central Asia as fractious was buttressed by interpretations of boundary problems in the late 1990s and early 2000s as Central Asian republics either began or accelerated the processes of delimiting and demarcating their international boundaries. From late 1998 onwards Uzbekistan paid greater attention to the control of flows of people and goods over its boundary, closing many minor crossing points, rerouting transport links away from cross-boundary sections, stepping up customs and security checks, and even erecting a 2-metre high barbed-wire perimeter fence along large sections of its Ferghana Valley boundary and mining other stretches. These unilateral moves created great inconvenience for many in the borderlands, leading to frustration and anger at crossings, scuffles between residents and soldiers, fatal shootings of smugglers, and the loss of cattle and life and limb in minefields. McGlinchey grouped these various processes and disputes together and labelled them a 'low level border war'.⁶⁴ In some academic quarters it thus became received wisdom to ascribe danger to 'the volatile Ferghana Valley',⁶⁵ which for Slim was 'in the midst of a host of crises'.⁶⁶

This academic portrayal of the Ferghana Valley as dangerous-because-fractious was replicated in other sites of discursive production. Many journalists agreed with the concern expressed by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting that 'frontier disputes could sow the seeds of inter-ethnic violence'.⁶⁷ For *Newsweek*, reporting on tensions at an Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan border crossing, a 'volatile cocktail of

⁶⁰ Abilbek Asankanov, 'Ethnic conflict in the Osh region in summer 1990: reasons and lessons', in Kumar Rupesinghe and Valery Tishkov, eds, *Ethnicity and power in the contemporary world* (Paris: United Nations University, 1996).

⁶¹ M. Haghayeghi, *Islam and politics in Central Asia* (New York: St Martin's, 1995), p. 186.

⁶² Daria Fane, 'Ethnicity and regionalism in Uzbekistan', in Leokadia Drobizheva, Rose Gottemoeller, Catherine McArdle Kelleher and Lee Walker, eds, *Ethnic conflict in the post-Soviet world: case studies and analysis* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), p. 275.

⁶³ P. L. Dash, 'Ethnic tussles in the Soviet Muslim republics', in K. Warikoo and Dawa Norbu, eds, *Ethnicity and politics in Central Asia* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1992), pp. 119–20.

⁶⁴ Eric McGlinchey, 'Powerless in Kyrgyzstan', RFE/RL Newline, 13 July 2000.

⁶⁵ Anna Matveeva, *EU stakes in Central Asia*, Chaillot paper 91 (Paris: Institute for Security Studies, 2006), p. 9.

⁶⁶ Randa Slim, 'The Ferghana Valley: in the midst of a host of crises', in Paul van Tongeren, Hans van de Veen and Juliette Verhoeven, eds, *Searching for peace in Europe and Asia: an overview of conflict prevention and peacebuilding initiatives* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2002).

⁶⁷ Ulugbek Babakulov, 'Kyrgyz–Uzbek border tensions', *Reporting Central Asia*, 3 Feb. 2002 (London: Institute for War and Peace Reporting), <http://www.iwpr.org>, accessed 31 March 2011.

Islam, ethnic hatred, drugs and poverty is ratcheting up tensions in the Ferghana Valley'.⁶⁸ This list, though not exhaustive, was typical of a genre that enumerated the supposed threats the valley was facing, the logic apparently being that simply noting them as coincident in the same place was evidence enough that some great conflagration was inevitable. A number of development reports employed similar logic. The US CPA's 1999 report, *Calming the Ferghana Valley*, although hurriedly researched and poorly edited, nonetheless bore the imprint both of important US think-tanks (the Council on Foreign Relations and the Century Foundation) and of well-known scholars (Barnett Rubin and Nancy Lubin). Animated by a concern that US access to the region's putative petrochemical 'riches' was threatened by the 'vulnerable and tense' Ferghana Valley, the report argued that 'new violence is likely, indeed, almost certain'.⁶⁹ The main evidence for such a strong claim is repeated referral back to unconnected incidents such as the 1990 Uzen–Osh violence and the 1997 assassination of officials in the city of Namangan. Effectively obscuring social processes in the Ferghana Valley, it is ultimately more revealing of American preoccupations, fears and interests than it is of Central Asia.

The geopolitical vision of Central Asia as dangerously fractious found its way into popular geopolitical visions in the UK and US. Imaginary fractious states that were nonetheless recognizably Central Asian featured as the settings for Gary Shteyngart's acclaimed comic novel *Absurdistan* and the 2008 anti-Iraq war Hollywood satire *War, Inc.*, set in 'Turaqistan'.⁷⁰ Similar, if more sober, portrayals of Central Asia as fractious have framed British television documentaries. In 2002–2003 the BBC ran a series of documentaries/travel films on the Central Asian republics entitled 'Holidays in the danger zone: meet the Stans'. The presenter, Simon Reeve, spent much of his time for the Kyrgyzstan episode in the Osh.

Likewise, the 2002 Channel 4 series 'Twenty-first century unseen wars' focused on the dangerous potential for ethnic tension and border disputes to trigger 'confusing and vicious conflicts' in the Ferghana Valley. The presenter, Sorious Samura, adduced four types of evidence to support his claim. First, he asserted that the population is ethnically mixed, assuming that proximity inevitably leads to conflict. Second, he reminded the viewer that violence had occurred 'already' (in 1990), implying inevitability and continuity. Third, he visited a boundary area where Uzbekistan had blocked off a road and erected a checkpoint. Jumping backwards and forwards over the blockade, remarking excitedly how 'crazy' it is, he informs the viewer that this issue is one that could ignite the tinderbox of the ethnic mix in this densely populated, poor, Muslim area. To bolster this view, he referred to the 1999 attack on parts of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, claiming: 'Two and a half years ago there was an armed rebellion across the Ferghana Valley.' This is a gross distortion, suggesting some widespread, popular uprising, rather than the actions of a small Islamist guerrilla group unrepresentative of popular feeling.

⁶⁸ Christian Caryl, 'Declining democracy', *Newsweek* web exclusive, 21 Jan. 2001, <http://www.newsweek.com>, accessed 21 Jan. 2011.

⁶⁹ Rubin and Lubin, *Calming the Ferghana Valley*, pp. x, xv–xvi.

⁷⁰ Gary Shteyngart, *Absurdistan* (London: Granta, 2006).

Finally, Samura explained conflict in one place by scripting it in terms of other places. ‘This could be the next Bosnia, Kosovo or Chechnya,’ he asserted. Rather than explain how poorly sketched out social processes and phenomena (such as ethnicity, poverty and migration) could inexorably lead to conflict, he lifted Central Asia and the Ferghana Valley from their actual geographical and historical coordinates by asserting similarities with other fractious places known to the British public through news reporting. Effacing the complex histories and geographies of the Ferghana Valley, his account made no attempt to explain exactly how a particularly boundary or ethnic mix would lead to a war. Like the academic and policy literature that adopts a historical and structural determinism, it simply asserted that violence is probable because ethnic conflicts occurred in the past and the contemporary Ferghana Valley can be considered similar to other fractious places where conflict has occurred. In short, such accounts have no room for *politics*, for the role of ethnic entrepreneurs in inciting violence, or for local state and non-state authority mechanisms for defusing tension.

This crude rendering of ethnic conflict is sustained by a disregard for more rigorous scholarly research that contests its assumptions and conclusions. Schoeberlein argued that ‘ethnicity’ is a fluid and malleable social process in Central Asia, from which conflict scenarios could not be easily read.⁷¹ Smith was not alone in observing that ‘If the cases of inter-ethnic violence are mapped over the period of the post-Soviet transition, it is clear that the occurrence of new violent ethnic conflicts has declined sharply since the early 1990s.’⁷² Megoran demonstrated how ‘border disputes’ were not simply existing political realities, but processes constructed within contested domestic political discourse with no necessary link to ethnic conflict.⁷³ In his study of boundary issues in Central Asia, Polat observed that Central Asian states have ‘for the most part resolved the issues virtually on all fronts through sustained efforts since independence.’⁷⁴ Indeed, as it turned out, warnings of widespread ethnic fracture proved wide of the mark, based as they were on mis-theorized conceptions of ethnicity and weak or absent empirical research.⁷⁵ Moreover, organized political violence in the Ferghana Valley since 1990 has tended to be directed against oppressive state structures, or has occurred in the aftermath of the fall of those structures. This suggests that, while physical danger and structural violence are very much a part of life in the region, the particular account of conflict and insecurity offered by the discourse of danger—where Central Asia is represented as obscure, oriental and fractious—is inaccurate. A more complex story of modern social and political conflict must be told.

⁷¹ J. Schoeberlein-Engel, ‘Identity in Central Asia: construction and contention in the conceptions of “Ozbek”, “Tajik”, “Muslim”, “Samarqandi” and other groups’, PhD diss., Harvard University, 1994.

⁷² Graham Smith, *The post-Soviet states: mapping the politics of transition* (London: Arnold, 1999), p. 227.

⁷³ Megoran, ‘The critical geopolitics of the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley boundary dispute’.

⁷⁴ Necati Polat, *Boundary issues in Central Asia* (Ardstley: Transnational, 2002), p. 167.

⁷⁵ Nick Megoran, ‘On researching “ethnic conflict”: epistemology, politics, and a Central Asian boundary dispute’, *Europe–Asia Studies* 59: 2, 2007, pp. 253–77.

The policy and practice of the discourse of danger

Notwithstanding criticism of ethnic conflict analysis from within the academy, some academics, policy-makers and journalists have continued to apply its categories. That the western geopolitical vision regards Central Asia as obscure, oriental and fractious is of great importance when we consider the policy implications of the discourse of danger. These are seen most clearly in the Ferghana Valley region discussed above. This section considers the ethnic violence in Osh in June 2010 before going on to look at how the discourse of danger has affected western development policy with respect to conflict resolution and security assistance in the region.

What about Osh?

Doesn't the horrendous Kyrgyz–Uzbek violence in Osh and Jalalabat in June 2010 prove that our argument is wrong, and that those who predicted large-scale violence in the Kyrgyzstani parts of the Ferghana Valley were right? To begin responding to this important objection it is first necessary to recognize the present limits of our knowledge. It is reckoned that several hundred people were murdered, and numerous businesses and homes looted and destroyed by arson. Some 185,000 Uzbeks sought temporary refuge in neighbouring Uzbekistan, and many Kyrgyz families fled elsewhere in Kyrgyzstan. As a semblance of order returned the mass killings ended, but subsequently kidnap, extortion, robbery, arbitrary arrest, dubious trials of suspects, and one-sided and hysterical media reporting have created a climate of fear that is leading large numbers of Uzbeks to seek temporary or permanent refuge abroad. The trigger of the violence is unknown, with rumours and allegations about careful planning beforehand being spread by people on all sides.

Having noted this, we would make two points. The first is theoretical. We are suggesting, with critical geopolitical theory, that representations of Central Asia as dangerous are important: they are not just superficial reflections or distortions of deeper realities, but part of those realities. This has been clearly demonstrated by the continuing aftermath of the Osh violence, which in some ways is even more troubling than the initial violence itself. In the weeks following the violence of June 2010, international organizations and media outlets generally narrated an account of Uzbeks endangered by Kyrgyz state and society: some depictions employed words like 'pogrom' and 'genocide'.⁷⁶ In keeping with the features of the discourse of danger, some western reporting suggested that the violence was historically and ethno-culturally predisposed, if not determined, with headlines such as 'Stalin's deadly legacy' and reference to the 'ethnic boiling-pot of Central Asia'.⁷⁷ Kyrgyz society, following such reports through the internet, was stung by

⁷⁶ International Crisis Group (ICG), 'The pogroms in Kyrgyzstan', *Asia Report* 193, 23 Aug. 2010, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/kyrgyzstan.aspx>, accessed 31 March 2011; Luke Harding, 'Kyrgyzstan killings are attempted genocide, say ethnic Uzbeks', *Guardian*, 17 June 2010, p. 1.

⁷⁷ Craig Murray, 'Kyrgyzstan: death, dictators and the Soviet legacy', *Daily Telegraph*, 17 June 2010; Edward

what it broadly read as misrepresentations that ignored the suffering of Kyrgyz and the putative threat to the Kyrgyz state. It broadly reacted by denying the victimhood of Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks and countenancing a backlash against them.⁷⁸ Exceptions exist, but the widely reported initial intercommunal sympathy largely evaporated in a subsequent surge of angry nationalist sentiment. This is making the prospects for future reconciliation and coexistence look bleak. The way we represent Central Asia as dangerous has real impacts upon local realities.

This observation, second, points to the discourse of danger's principal omission: domestic politics. The discourse of danger simply lumps together a series of threats—great power competition, drugs, border disputes, past conflicts, ethnic tensions, etc.—and argues that because they occur in the same place they will inevitably contribute to a conflagration. What the narratives that we have criticized lack are attention to the ingredient that accounts to a significant degree for both the savagery of the June violence and the subsequent anti-Uzbek backlash: the politics of nationalism. Kyrgyzstan's first president, Askar Akaev, tried to dampen ethnic nationalism and foster a sense of civic unity that scripted the state as 'the common home' of all groups. Pitted against him were a group of nationalistic opposition parliamentarians who regarded Uzbeks and other minorities as fifth columnists, as threats to the territorial integrity of the Kyrgyz state and as impediments to the Kyrgyzification of a tragically 'Russified' Kyrgyz elite. Akaev supported Uzbek minorities and had alliances within them, and this led to a sense among many Uzbeks that they had a viable future in Kyrgyzstan—indeed, compared to life in authoritarian Uzbekistan, even an enviable one. Akaev further bolstered his position by curtailing the influence of his nationalistic opponents.

Akaev's suppression of nationalists was an important reason why violence did not recur in the 1990s, contrary to many predictions. Nonetheless, it was the nationalistic opposition that swept to power in the anti-Akaev coup of 2005, putting a new politics of nationalism in place that eroded the position of Uzbeks. As one Kyrgyzstani Uzbek academic, who under Akaev had been quite hopeful for the future of Osh Uzbeks, put it to one of the authors in November 2009: 'The everyday racism that we experienced under Akaev became under Bakiyev state policy ... all it will take is one spark, and the whole thing will explode.' The May 2010 clashes for control in Jalalabat between, on the one hand, Usen Sydykov and ex-allies of Bakiyev, and, on the other hand, supporters of the ethnic Kyrgyz politician Omurbek Tekebaev and the ethnic Uzbek leader Kadyrjan Batyrov, quickly developed an ethnic dimension. A local journalist reporting from Jalalabat at the time noted that the chances of widespread ethnic violence had increased considerably owing to the nationalist politics that had become more salient since 2005 and the instability which had arisen since the fall of the Bakiyev regime in

Stourton, 'Stalin's deadly legacy', *Guardian*, 21 June 2010, p. 29; 'Stalin's harvest', *The Economist*, 17 June 2010, http://www.economist.com/node/16377083?story_id=16377083&fsrc=rss, accessed 31 March 2011. Some earlier reports identify, even more spuriously, Lenin as the culprit (Harding, 'Kyrgyzstan killings', p. 1).

⁷⁸ Madeleine Reeves helped clarify our thinking on this point.

April 2010.⁷⁹ This is not to suggest that the violence could have been predicted but rather that the danger of ethnic conflict is understood better through an analysis that sees it as politically constructed and contingent.⁸⁰

These two points suggest that the discourse of danger provided the language through which many journalists and commentators communicated an essentialist and historicist reading of ethnic fractiousness over an interpretation which looked at the political dynamics of nationalist politics and state crisis. What can be learned from the lack of large-scale ethnic violence in Osh during the Akaev period, and its ugly reappearance in the post-Bakiyev collapse, is that violence does not occur in a place simply because it is a particular type of place characterized by particular processes and with a particular past. We must beware of simple appeals to general discourses of danger and, through careful research rather than the appeal to cliché, understand and analyse the complex ways in which political contestation endangers Central Asians—and how external discourses of danger can exacerbate such processes.

Conflict resolution and security assistance to the Ferghana Valley

The significance of the discourse of danger is not simply that it leads to academic and journalistic misinterpretations of events in the region but that it informs and, therefore, deforms western policy and practice. As noted above, in the mid-1990s the Council on Foreign relations established the CPA to address latent conflict before the emergence or re-emergence of civil war. The Ferghana Valley region of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan was chosen as a laboratory for the new early warning approach on the basis of its perceived history of ethnic conflict. By the time the CPA's report was published, a proposed major UN conflict prevention initiative, the Ferghana Valley Development Programme, had been cancelled owing to opposition from the government of Uzbekistan. However, despite this opposition and particularly after 9/11 many other international NGO projects to build peace or prevent ethnic conflict were launched. Programmes such as Mercy Corps' Peaceful Communities Initiative typically targeted clusters of communities of different ethnicities at the borders of the three states of the valley. In an era of the merging of security and development in western policy discourse and practice, these development programmes were accompanied by security assistance, particularly in the area of border management.⁸¹

Here we briefly discuss findings from three academic studies of conflict resolution and security assistance practice in the Ferghana Valley in order to substantiate our claim that the discourse of danger deforms policy and, in so doing, endangers Central Asia. First, Megoran and colleagues have critically considered aid to

⁷⁹ Abdujalil Abdurasulov, 'Lawlessness and change in the interaction between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in southern Kyrgyzstan', paper given to round table on Kyrgyzstan, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 22 May 2010.

⁸⁰ The ICG's Aug. 2010 report acknowledges that 'the international community' did not pay significant attention to the events of May 2010 in Jalalabat, suggesting that had they done so the Osh events of June 2010 might have been mitigated or prevented. See ICG, 'The pogroms in Kyrgyzstan', p. 7.

⁸¹ Mark Duffield, *Global governance and the new wars: the merging of development and security* (London: Zed, 2002).

Central Asian border guards from foreign donors such as the US and EU seeking to counter the threat of narcotics smuggling.⁸² Assistance improves boundary control infrastructures, from patrol vehicles and scanning machines to training programmes and help in building integrated computer databases to monitor the movement of people. However, smuggling networks commonly operate in alliance with corrupt law enforcement bodies and political elites. Increased border controls expose shuttle-traders and petty smugglers to increased disruption and extortion without seriously affecting the activities of the major players. Accusations of violence and harassment at checkpoints inflame public opinion and harm relations between neighbouring communities. However well-intentioned, these programmes fail to grasp the politics of border control in the region, and thereby exacerbate the hardship of the rural poor and intercommunal tensions.

Second, Bichsel has explored international attempts to resolve irrigation disputes in the Ferghana Valley.⁸³ She shows how a discourse of danger in these initiatives informs essentialist ethnic conflict readings.⁸⁴ These approaches miss the complexities of local politics and even subsidize and enhance the authority of local criminal leaders. She takes as the foil for her argument the identification of 'dangerous divisions' over resources and along ethnic lines, looking at the creation of international, inter-ethnic water usage associations and the rehabilitation of canals.⁸⁵ The community-based organizations (CBOs) she surveyed were designed with little or no thought to local politics. Thus they simply resourced local elites who were battling for control of state power and resources. For example, in the Kyshtut municipality of Batken region, these authorities included the (now deceased) local parliamentarian, businessman and alleged criminal Baiaman Erkinbaev.⁸⁶ As Bichsel masterfully shows, *aksakals* (elders) and *ashar* (collective labour) serve as mere decorative dressing for international aid in the Ferghana Valley.⁸⁷ They are of instrumental purpose for the representation of 'indigeneity' in projects conducted, but they are not considered in terms of the kind of authority and substantive legitimacy they may or may not have.⁸⁸

Third, John Heathershaw's discussion of peacebuilding activities in Tajikistan tells a similar story.⁸⁹ Not only does a discourse of danger misinterpret the nature of conflict and prescribe inappropriate solutions, it works to reproduce itself through processes of practical representation. The CBOs studied by Heathershaw were typically composed of pre-existing groups within the community that were invisible to international programme officers (though not their local staff) and made their decisions informally, over tea in the mosque or community centre out

⁸² Nick Megoran, Gaël Raballand and Jérôme Bouyjou, 'Performance, representation, and the economics of border control in Uzbekistan', *Geopolitics* 10: 4, 2005, pp. 712–42.

⁸³ Christine Bichsel, *Conflict transformation in Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2009).

⁸⁴ Christine Bichsel, 'In search of harmony: repairing infrastructure and social relations in the Ferghana Valley', *Central Asian Survey* 24: 1, 2005, pp. 53–66.

⁸⁵ Bichsel, *Conflict transformation in Central Asia*, pp. 121–2.

⁸⁶ Bichsel, *Conflict transformation in Central Asia*, pp. 90–94.

⁸⁷ Bichsel, *Conflict transformation in Central Asia*, p. 82.

⁸⁸ Bichsel, *Conflict transformation in Central Asia*, p. 70.

⁸⁹ Heathershaw, *Post-conflict Tajikistan*.

of the sight of the donors. However, the formal evaluation of these programmes did not question the premises of pre-existing ethnic fracture in the communities and provided an account of the partial success of the programme in terms of the establishment of the formal institution of the CBO. Here the informal triumphed over the formal but in a way that left the formal image of peace-building intact.⁹⁰ This occurred as a result of various processes through which received wisdoms could be reaffirmed, including quantification of survey findings, narration of success stories and visualization of projects through appealing photographs of formal workshops. These processes simply address the extent to which the preconceived dangers of interethnic tension and lack of resources have been attenuated rather than whether these are the dangers experienced by local people in practice. Broader studies of local political and economic relations have revealed a far more complex story of Tajiks dispossessing Tajiks as ex-commanders have been allowed to capture organs of the state.⁹¹

In sum, these three examples show that the discourse of danger is no mere abstract representation of Central Asia but a practical form of knowledge production with potentially dangerous implications for the region's citizens. This is because it helps shape policy-making, and development aid flows according to a false prospectus of an obscure, oriental and innately fractious Central Asia. On the basis of such a prospectus it is difficult for western governments and international NGOs to make sense of the region. As the examples above show, this can lead to the empowering of ex-warlords and criminal chiefs and the subsidizing of corrupt state agencies. In this way, the discourse of danger creates practices of international aid that are part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

Conclusion: a new agenda for Central Asian studies

This article has argued that western geopolitical discourse misrepresents and constructs Central Asia as inherently and particularly dangerous. In considering a range of formal, practical and popular sites where such geopolitical knowledge is articulated and the region made knowable to a US and UK audience, we have identified three dimensions of endangerment in the identification of Central Asia as *obscure*, *oriental* and *fractious*. These articulations are pervasive because they are mutually reinforcing. They are not merely objectionable because of their inaccuracies and crudities. From development aid and commercial ties to election observation, security assistance and the funding of academic research and exchanges, many dimensions of western policies towards Central Asia are constituted in terms of these three dimensions of a geopolitical discourse of endangerment. Thus, we contend, the western discourse of danger actually endangers Central Asia in that it informs misguided policy interventions. The discourse of danger shapes much

⁹⁰ John Heathershaw, 'Tajikistan's virtual politics of peace', *Europe-Asia Studies* 61: 7, Sept. 2009, pp. 1315–36.

⁹¹ Christoph Zürcher and colleagues, *Analysis of peace and conflict potential in Rашt Valley, Shuraobad District and GBAO* (Berlin: Analysis Research Consulting, March 2004); Michael Barnett and Christoph Zürcher, 'The peacebuilder's contract: how external state-building reinforces weak statehood', in Roland Paris and Timothy Sisk, eds, *The dilemmas of statebuilding* (London: Routledge, 2009).

of the language through which knowledge about the region is produced and communicated.

Because danger, dimness and distance are intertwined, Central Asia presents an unclear and uncertain danger rather than a clear and present one. This seems to challenge the mainstream Copenhagen School conceptualization of security,⁹² in that it suggests that security threats, rather than being regarded as existential and requiring extraordinary countermeasures, can in given spaces and at given times be treated with indifference and even neglect. The measures described above that have been taken against the Central Asian security threats identified in the discourse of danger are quite ordinary technologies of international conflict resolution and security assistance rather than extraordinary acts of military intervention. It is surely the spatial imaging of distance between Them and Us that generates simultaneous danger and indifference in western geopolitical discourse and practice.

Our argument does not seek to provide a total account of western geopolitical thinking on the region, much less a critique of the whole of Central Asian studies. Our claim is not that Central Asia does not have its dangers, but that the way these dangers are represented in western public discourse are far removed from the way they are understood in Central Asia and in much serious scholarship on the region. We do not claim that all academic, journalistic and policy-oriented representations of the region are uniformly infected with these distortions. Nor do we claim that these representations translate directly and consistently into foreign policy. However, a discursive economy of security has emerged in these fields where it pays to speak in terms of essential dangers. The discourse we have focused on is largely a western or, more accurately, an Anglo-American one because this is the discourse which has salience within our society and government in the UK. Within Central Asian studies in the western world the discourse is not found equally and universally but is concentrated in the study of conflict resolution, security and international politics. Discourses of danger about Central Asia are found in Russian and other language discourses within the region as well as outside it. They are often intertextually linked with the English-language literature. For example, the Russian field of conflict studies (*konfliktologiya*) draws on some of the canonical work in the western field of conflict resolution while imbuing it with altered meanings.⁹³ The discourse ebbs and flows as the conceptualizations of dangers shift over time. The problem with the discourse of danger is not that other stories are not being told, but that too often they fall on deaf ears. They are just not as convenient, not in keeping with certain presuppositions that hold fast, and may require a greater degree of knowledge and experience of Central Asia in order to be understood. 'Political palatability', Myer argues, 'remains a strong criterion in determining which interpretations of Central Asian political and social dynamics gain an ascendancy'.⁹⁴

⁹² Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: a new framework for analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

⁹³ Madeleine Reeves, 'Locating danger: *konfliktologiya* and the search for fixity in the Ferghana Valley borderlands', *Central Asian Survey* 24: 1, 2005, pp. 67–81.

⁹⁴ Myer, *Islam and colonialism*, p. 269.

The discourse of danger also works in its silences. We claim that Islamism, border conflict and great power competition are not the primary dynamics of danger in Central Asia. We argue here in the case of Osh and in our wider work that these things are typically of secondary importance to the politics of nationalism and political-economic relations, particularly the dynamics of organized crime and the vulnerabilities generated by integration into the global market economy. These are the omissions of the narrative of danger. Critical enquiry on Central Asia that speaks of these silences remains in its infancy, but a counternarrative is emerging among both local and foreign producers of geopolitical knowledge. In popular culture, Kyrgyz film-maker Marat Alykulov represents 'The border' (in his 2006 film *Chek'ara*) as a site of state violence against citizens.⁹⁵ In policy analysis, American diplomat Richard Holbrooke has challenged hyperbolic western intelligence analyses of Islamic militancy in Tajikistan.⁹⁶ A considerable number of academic studies have now emerged which reveal the role of the discourse of danger in producing practical knowledge of the region. They explore the alternative local discourses and practices of living life at the border,⁹⁷ practising Islam,⁹⁸ coping with poverty,⁹⁹ being female,¹⁰⁰ and experiencing migration.¹⁰¹ As more and more western journalists, academics and policy-makers accrue experience of fieldwork in the region these counternarratives may become more common. Most importantly, as the post-Soviet generation of young Central Asians take a greater place in producing knowledge about the region it should become more difficult to sustain the crudest distortions. Collaborative knowledge production with this new generation is surely the key to challenging the discourse of danger.

Nevertheless, we should be neither self-righteous nor complacent about the task. We do not suggest that such accounts, including our own, can produce knowledge entirely uncorrupted by ideology, expediency or power. All producers of knowledge 'depart for the field bowing under the weight of our own culture'.¹⁰² Moreover, our critical enquiries are of limited value if they do not speak of the very real insecurities faced by Central Asians. The aim of any counternarrative to the discourse of danger must be to reveal some of the diverse experiences of danger as felt by individuals, families and communities in the face of nationalism, capitalist restructuring and new modes of territorial governance: in short, to help

⁹⁵ Marat Alykulov (director), *Chek'ara* (Bishkek: Kyrgyzfilm / Oy Art, 2006).

⁹⁶ Johnson's Russia List, *Oxford analytica and ambassador's response* [re: Tajikistan], 17 March 2006, <http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/2006-67-18.cfm>, accessed 18 July 2006.

⁹⁷ Madeleine Reeves, 'Border-work: an ethnography of the state at its limits in the Ferghana Valley', PhD diss., Cambridge University, 2007.

⁹⁸ Johan Rasanayagam, 'Healing with spirits and the formation of Muslim selfhood in post-Soviet Uzbekistan', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society* (n.s.) 12: 2, 2006, pp. 377-93.

⁹⁹ Jakob Rigi, 'The conditions of post-Soviet dispossessed youth and work in Almaty, Kazakhstan', *Critique of Anthropology* 23: 1, 2003, pp. 35-49.

¹⁰⁰ Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, 'Whose security? State-building and the "emancipation" of women in Central Asia', *International Relations* 18: 1, 2004, pp. 91-107.

¹⁰¹ Madeleine Reeves, 'Travels in the margins of the state: everyday geography in the Ferghana Valley borderlands', in Jeff Sahadeo and Russell Zanca, eds, *Everyday life in Central Asia: past and present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

¹⁰² A. C. G. M. Robben and Carolyn Nordstrom, 'Introduction: the anthropology and ethnography of violence and sociopolitical conflict', in Robben and Nordstrom, eds, *Fieldwork under fire: contemporary studies of violence and survival* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 14.

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us to read and write Central Asia's place in global politics differently. In doing so they contest and destabilize the geopolitical gaze upon which the discourse of danger is based. Once we have mitigated the dangers that we, as scholars of Central Asia, pose to the region, we may be better placed to contribute to mitigating the numerous other dangers that its people face.