



### Locating Central Eurasia's Inherent Resilience

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## Title

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## Abstract

This article aims to contextualise the inherent resilience of Central Eurasian states through the exploration of their particular history. The main purpose is to ground the ideas of resilience and capacity building in the context of the geography and ecology of Central Eurasia thus confronting the current views of the need for making these communities resilient by borrowing European, Western or global 'best practice' in order to achieve stability and development. This paper offers an overview of the history of the region to bring into focus the 'local' Central Eurasian milieu. The sophisticated tapestry of understanding, action and strategies developed over centuries has made this region resilient in the face of unpredictability caused by natural and manmade events. This paper seeks to locate how the region has consistently overcome obstacles in its long history of inhabiting a disparate space. We apply the term intercalation here to describe the emergence of a collective identity from strongly interacting ingredients that represents the inherent resilience of the region. Consequently, the focus is on the ways in which communities within the region connect, cooperate and build nodes of interaction to achieve prosperity and development.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, Central Eurasia, BRI, EAEU, Resilience, Regional Organisations, Mongol Empire

## Locating Central Eurasia

Central Eurasia is home to some of the oldest and most diverse civilisations in the world. Geographically it stretches from the Caspian Sea to Western China and includes modern day Central Asia, Caucasus and the Danube Delta. The term Central Eurasia is used here to accommodate the aspects of the region that go well beyond geographical borders of nation states today and refers to the expansiveness of the region that encompasses Central Asia and Inner Asia (xiv, Levi 2020). The actual terminology applied to the region has been a subject of scholarly debates and varies according to the time period (see Khazanov and Crookenden 1986; Frank 1992; Cowan 2007). Historically, it has accommodated an admixture of nomadic, semi-sedentary and sedentary peoples of Turkic and Iranian descent who have inhabited the large expanse of Eurasia for centuries. From the earliest migrations to cataclysmic natural events like earthquakes and climate change, monumental shifts have forged these communities that are at once the oldest and newest conglomerations of peoples. Located as Central Eurasia is on the historic Silk Road(s), the region has been the famed contact zone for diverse groups for at least two thousand years. Historically, this space has experienced a high level of mobility and interaction as a result of nomadic and semi sedentary social and cultural systems. It has served as the central node of significant connectivity across the Eurasian space, especially from the thirteenth century.

Post-1991 saw a monumental shift in the region with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Central Eurasia for the purposes of this study includes the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Since independence, these countries have been variously subsumed under categories of post-Soviet, -Socialist, -Communist among others and have been included in the ranks of underdeveloped countries. This has meant specific things in the context of the development discourse with international organisations and European and Western developed countries offering formulaic solutions to perceived Soviet inefficiencies. While this was genuinely welcomed by the Central Eurasian countries in the early 1990s, the last decade has seen remarkable levels of scepticism and questioning of these 'one size fits all' solutions. This has led to a shift to the 'local' and has initiated processes ranging from challenging neo-liberal notions of politics, economics and society to the realisation for the need to embrace differences. With this in mind, this paper focuses on locating Central Eurasia in historical context with a view to describing its inherent resilience through the exploration of intercalation (Weller et al. 2005).

The paper is interdisciplinary and will inform the disciplines of history, international relations, political science and area studies. The main contribution will be to highlight the role cooperation has played in Eurasia and that the architects of that cooperation have been Central Eurasian actors in history. The historical backdrop serves to enrich the discourse on Central Eurasia and is offered as a tool to reimagine the communities that have simultaneously inhabited the centre and the periphery. There is an attempt at synthesising historical information with, broadly speaking, sociological and political processes at play in the modern era. The categories of analysis are historical and are used to explain trends in behaviour over an extended period of time. This particular rendition of events speaks to the shift towards decolonising disciplines. International relations studies have attracted criticism for an over-reliance on European and Eurocentric (Westphalian) notions of nation-states to understand world politics. This paper aspires

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3 to speak to the importance of decolonising international relations and go further by calling for de-  
4 sedentarising historical discourses which overwhelmingly focus on qualities of sedentary societies  
5 as a benchmark for civilization (Rouse 2020). We attempt to locate nomads and steppe polity  
6 within Central Eurasian history and, as such, use this as an initial step towards an aspiration to call  
7 for a change in modes of thinking and analysis. This is done primarily through the application of  
8 the concept of intercalation that highlights Central Eurasia as a zone of intense interaction between  
9 different polities, peoples and ideas that serves to describe these societies as resilient in time and  
10 space.  
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14 We begin by providing a concise understanding of resilience in an increasingly uncertain  
15 world and introduce the concept of intercalation to explain Central Eurasian (actors, states and  
16 communities) resilience. In order to do so, we use theories of international relations to locate  
17 Central Eurasia in the post-1991 world order. Next, we offer a summary of the historical trajectory  
18 of the region. Following that we identify two categories of analysis, namely Eurasia and the Empire,  
19 to contextualise Central Eurasian history for the purposes of norm-making and behaviour. This is  
20 followed by giving the context of Eurasia's geography and exigencies of medieval empires to  
21 explain how connectedness lies at the very heart of governance and development in the region  
22 throughout history. We use the example of traders in the 13<sup>th</sup> century among others to illustrate  
23 how Central Eurasians translated different cultures and found interconnected spaces that led to  
24 greater prosperity. The next section traces regional integration in the modern era to express the  
25 region's continued desire for cooperation and functional connectivity. In this section, we juxtapose  
26 regional integration processes with the social constructivist theory in international relations.  
27 Finally, the conclusion highlights the need for understanding Central Eurasia within its particular  
28 historical context, highlighting intercalation processes, to understand the inherent resilience of  
29 these communities.  
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### 41 **Contextualising Resilience**

42 The concept of resilience and good governance are increasingly used as a tool by international  
43 organisations like the European Union, World Bank, IMF and OECD, among others, to teach  
44 good practice in governance to affect capacity and build resilient communities in developing  
45 countries. In this context, resilience is defined as the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties  
46 and the ability of an object to spring back into shape especially in a VUCA (vulnerable, uncertain,  
47 complex and ambiguous) world (Bennis and Nannus 1978). Scholars have proposed resilience-  
48 thinking to explain a variety of issues from the management of natural resources (Walker et al.  
49 2006, xiii) to the behaviour of cooperative organisations like the Non-Aligned Movement (Vieira  
50 2016). Vieira, for instance, used the idea of a shared identity as the basis of continued resilience,  
51 and scholars studying international relations have expanded it to study a number of areas including  
52 economic reforms, civil society and governance globally.  
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57 The concept has attracted criticism in recent times as it is increasingly seen as a way to  
58 explain strategies of governance especially in a neoliberal context. Scholars have critiqued this  
59 western-oriented export of 'good governance' that is seen as an instrument to impose 'western'  
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3 thinking and governance on developing states (Chandler 2010, 2014). Furthermore, challenges  
4 posed by poverty, disease, environment and climate change have created complexity in the world  
5 that is calling into question the application of resilience-thinking in the way international  
6 organisations are using it. More recently, there have been calls to shift the focus to the 'local'  
7 (Chander 2014; Korosteleva and Flockhart 2020) that is better able to instil sustainability and  
8 responsiveness in governance. In this paper and the rest of the special issue, there is an attempt to  
9 explain the resilience of the region of Central Eurasia as a 'quality of complex adaptive system' and  
10 'a new analytic of governance' by bringing the 'local' into focus. This is done specifically to propose  
11 the building blocks of a 'good life' in the context of the local environment (Korosteleva and  
12 Petrova, Forthcoming 2021). An associated concept is that of peoplehood which, for the purposes  
13 of this collected volume, is primarily community driven and highlights the Central Eurasian  
14 historical perspective.

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20 International theory often prioritises state actors in determining agency, process and social  
21 structures. It is important to point out that state actors represent communities and peoples on the  
22 ground and are an outcome of the local milieu that determines behaviour and practice. The local  
23 context of Central Eurasia needs cognisance to begin the process of understanding the region,  
24 including the ability of its states and its people, to inform good governance, capacity building and  
25 indeed the pursuit of a 'good life' whether from within or with help from outside. As Mearsheimer  
26 puts it, 'there are no universal truths regarding what constitutes a good life' and disagreements  
27 regarding what constitutes a good life can be profound (Mearsheimer 2020, Chapter 2: 7). To help  
28 locate the local context we turn to Holling who ascribes three properties to an adaptive complex  
29 system: wealth (inherent potential), controllability (internal connectedness) and adaptive capacity  
30 of any ecosystem, individual and culture. Any social or economic system can derive inherent  
31 potential from skills, network of relationships or mutual trust (Holling 2001, 394). Building on  
32 this, the long arc of history is used as the basis of Central Eurasian identity-formation, community,  
33 nation-state and region that taken together represent the process of intercalation. The main  
34 category of analysis is historical and we use extant sources that span steppe and sedentary  
35 interactions in time. The use of secondary sources helps provide a comprehensive picture that is  
36 used mainly to illustrate elements that emphasise cooperation in Central Eurasian communities  
37 through its history. The making of these communities in empires, Khanates and the Soviet Union  
38 are the necessary frames through which state and community behaviour should be understood.

### 44 45 **Intercalation Processes in Central Eurasia**

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47 The process of intercalation captures the essence of how these societies found themselves adjacent  
48 to numerous others and yet continued to retain their inherent properties to respond efficiently to  
49 increasingly complex environments (Kalra and Saxena, 2021). In Central Eurasia, a collective  
50 identity emerged from those strongly interacting elements that responded to VUCA worlds of the  
51 past through locating connected spaces. Those interactions referred to as 'repositories of action'  
52 (Neumann & Wigen 2018) represented Turko-Mongol and Turko-Persian Central Eurasia  
53 (Canfield 1991), as examples of intercalation processes, discussed below. In addition, the region is  
54 prone to earthquakes that represent immense unpredictability. These have shaped the ecology,  
55 society and economy of the region (Jackson, Earthquakes Without Frontiers Project, 2012-2018).  
56 The combination of manmade and natural events, often cataclysmic, left indelible marks on these  
57 societies to give rise to resilient communities. We use instrumental and civilisational (western and  
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3 non-western) understandings of international relations and perceive the role played by Central  
4 Eurasia in macro level regional organisations in the modern era as a way to reinforce the desire  
5 and need for connectedness. Regional organisations are an example of the process of intercalation  
6 in motion since they represent national interests of Central Eurasian countries in a regional context  
7 in the present day. Subsequently, the focus is on the tendency of Central Eurasia (peoples and  
8 states) to connect as a fundamental response to unpredictability in the world around them. The  
9 resilience that emerged out of this shared geography saw these societies continuously trying to  
10 connect and find partnerships in response to external challenges and transformations through  
11 history. Based on this repeated connectedness we ascribe a collective regional identity to Central  
12 Eurasia that is more in tune with cooperative world orders (Wendt 1992).  
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### 16 17 **Disruptions and Reconfiguration** 18

19 The uncertain, unpredictable (Bousquet and Geyer 2011) and complex world (Kavalski 2007) of  
20 today is a far cry from what was predicted in the early 1990s. The dissolution of the Soviet Union  
21 was seen as the triumph of the American led rules-based world order that was born out of World  
22 War 2 and the Cold War era and marked the end of history (Fukuyama 1992). Ikenberry (2005)  
23 described the new world order as the age of an American led global order loosely based on rules  
24 of open markets, security alliances, multilateral cooperation and democratic community. The end  
25 of the 1990s saw the creation of an unprecedented political system with America at the helm of a  
26 transoceanic alliance with Europe and other democratic states that were tied together by the  
27 market, institutions and security partnerships (Ikenberry 2005, 133-39). Central Eurasian countries  
28 arrived into this world system that wanted to fashion images of them in the post-Soviet space but  
29 one that was not prepared to accept the diversity that they brought with them.  
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34 The main international relations schools: realism, liberalism and social constructivism view  
35 cooperation and cooperative orders in different ways. For the realists, cooperation is not part of  
36 the nature of state and thus impossible; while liberals believe processes (institutions) can help  
37 evolve cooperative behaviours over time. For realists, liberals, neo-realists and neo-liberals the  
38 possibility of cooperation does not exist or exists only under specific conditions of international  
39 institutions. While the realist perspective is unable to engage with the new security dilemmas at  
40 hand, such as issues of climate change, natural resource management, poverty, hunger, financial  
41 upheavals and indeed disease that pose a far more real threat to modern day nation-states than  
42 war; the neoliberal dream and the promise of institutional theory have also fallen short in  
43 addressing these problems (Mearsheimer 2018). The world has continued on a trajectory that  
44 appears to have increased complexity (Holling 2001) and brought forth challenges that cause yet  
45 more dissonance and disruption, and pit civilisations against each other (Huntington 2011).  
46 Specifically, the imposition of western ideologies and concepts has reintroduced colonial agendas  
47 in understanding Central Eurasia (Dadabaev and Heathershaw 2020).  
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53 Social constructivists, especially Alexander Wendt, consider anarchy an outcome of what  
54 states make of it thus making collective action and cooperation possible (Wendt 1992, 395, 402).  
55 They believe that the domestic society creates the raw materials necessary for a collective regional  
56 identity that views cooperation as possible and even desirable (Wendt 1992, 403). In this context,  
57 the very notion of identity formation that lies at the heart of social constructivism when applied  
58 to this region rests in the ability of Central Eurasian nations to grab the reins of a Eurasian narrative  
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3 and imbue it with the lessons of their lived experience that created a collective stable identity,  
4 irrespective of fixed territoriality (Wendt 1992). The analytical frames to understand Central  
5 Eurasian societies are located in the historical trajectory of the Eurasian space (geography and  
6 ecology) that continues to select connectivity over disconnectedness. The nature of the peoples of  
7 Central Eurasia as interlocutors in this vast space instils characteristics of cooperation in these  
8 societies. In other words, in being connected the region finds itself individually and collectively  
9 prosperous, making connectedness the heart of this particular discourse.  
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### 13 **Central Eurasia in the making**

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15 The peoples of Central Eurasia represent nomadic, semi-sedentary and sedentary civilisations in  
16 history. They have their own languages and cultures which are a product of nomadic and sedentary  
17 traditions in the steppe, oases cities and urban centres. Warrior societies like that of the Scythians,  
18 Xiongnu (Huns), Kok Turks (sixth century), Uyghurs (eighth century) and Mongols (thirteenth  
19 century) were categorically different from their more sedentary neighbours in China. Beginning  
20 with the Xiongnu (third century BC), there is clear evidence of nomads with their own political  
21 and social make-up. The evolution of nomadic society with its own hierarchical structure,  
22 leadership and economy flourished on the Eurasian steppe. Archaeological evidence, placed  
23 alongside Chinese textual analysis, paints a vivid picture of China's contacts with the Eurasian  
24 steppe peoples as far back as the Bronze Age. Interactions were often militaristic, diplomatic and  
25 trade related (Cosmo 1999). A stable network of exchanges included horses, cattle and other  
26 pastoral products imported by China, while there is also evidence of jewellery, weapons and other  
27 objects from China in tombs in steppe regions (Cosmo 1999, 957). These interactions led to shared  
28 understandings in a space that was constantly in contact. Accordingly, Central Eurasian societies  
29 displayed processes of intercalation in how they found ways to coexist while still maintaining  
30 distinct communities to display diversity in civilisational cultures (nomadic-sedentary and pastoral-  
31 agricultural) that 'echoed through later regional cultures and into the socio-politics of the present  
32 day' (Rouse 2020, 399-400).  
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39 Other than China, pre-Islamic Persia also had interest in Eurasia and there was expansion into  
40 Central Eurasia by the Achaemenid (4-5 century BC) and Sassanian (3-7 century AD) empires.  
41 They left a lasting Persianate imprint on society. With the Arab conquest of the eighth century and  
42 the Battle of Talas, Chinese expansion came to a close and the Islamic period of Central Eurasia  
43 took hold. The Caliphate brought with it Arab and Islamicised Persianate influences that continued  
44 well into the Samanid period (819-1004 AD). These features of pre-Islamic Persia and the  
45 Islamicate world (Arab and Persian) mingled with the nomadic entities, especially under the ruling  
46 houses of the Qarakhanid (tenth century), Ghaznavids (tenth century) and Seljuqs, and reached a  
47 climax under the Chingissid Mongols (thirteenth century). Subsequent Khanates (Timurid,  
48 Shaibanid and Kazakh Khanates) across Eurasia continued to pay homage to Chinggis Khan and  
49 the Mongol Empire as the source of political legitimacy, rule and governance well into the  
50 eighteenth-nineteenth centuries. From the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries, society was  
51 organised around a ruling class made up of elites of Iranian and Turkic descent, the language of  
52 court (government, art and literature) was Persian, and Arabic served as the formal language of  
53 religion and education. This multi-civilisational and multi-ethnic society should be viewed as an  
54 illustration of the processes of intercalation wherein Central Eurasian society had strong influences  
55 from at least three different racial and cultural groups that were accommodated and represented  
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3 in individual and collective practice in the region. These elements were visible not only in Central  
4 Eurasian empires but were evident further afield in India and Iran as well. The region-wide shared  
5 dynastic tradition included rule driven by power (not religion), inclusive religious policies,  
6 prominent role of women in society (ruling and patronage), and architecture and art that spoke to  
7 the grandeur and power of the ruling elites (Robinson 2007). Furthermore, the Bukharan, Khivan,  
8 Kokand and Kazakh Khanates in Central Eurasia continued to operate within this same cultural  
9 and political realm, exhibiting resilience in subsequent time periods. As mentioned earlier, Canfield  
10 (1991) described Central Eurasia as Turko-Mongol and Turko-Persia in character, which is referred  
11 to as the process of intercalation in which strongly interacting disparate civilisations and societies  
12 of Eurasia were able to flourish together and still maintain their innate features. This is not to say  
13 they did not change, but rather that they displayed adaptive capacity thinking by fashioning new  
14 institutions in response to challenges. For instance, nomadic and sedentary institutions were able  
15 to operate in parallel in Central Eurasia after it became part of the Mongol Empire in the thirteenth  
16 century that, in turn, made it an empire of even greater purport (Kalra 2020a).

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22 The advent of the Tsarist Russian Empire at the beginning of the eighteenth century began the  
23 process of European colonisation that reached a culmination with the Directorate of Turkestan in  
24 the nineteenth century that included nearly all of present-day Central Eurasia. The Bolshevik  
25 revolution in 1917 and the eventual shift of power to the Soviet Union saw the National  
26 Delimitation process that became the foundation stone for the now sovereign nation states of  
27 Central Eurasia (See Hirsch 2005; Martin 2011; Roy 2000). This continuum of connectivity  
28 (physical, political and economic) was significantly impacted in 1991 with the first major disruption  
29 in the region when flexible borders became international borders characterised by military posts  
30 and barbed wires. Until 1991, nomadic empires, Khanates, European empires and even the Soviet  
31 Union had maintained a mostly connected Central Eurasian landscape. It was only with the advent  
32 of independent nation-states post-1991 that there was a fracture in the physical connectivity in the  
33 region that impacted mobility in all spheres. However, soon after 1991 we saw a number of  
34 cooperative organisations: economic and political, established in the region to respond to the  
35 disruption. These initiatives driven by multiple players in Eurasia including Kazakhstan,  
36 Uzbekistan, Russia, China, Japan and even Turkey indicate a region-wide understanding and desire  
37 for connectivity (Murashkin 2018). These include, but are not limited to, the Commonwealth of  
38 Independent States (CIS), Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), Shanghai Five and the  
39 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc), Central  
40 Asian Union (CAU), Free Trade Zone, Central Asia Plus Japan, Black Sea Forum for Partnership  
41 and Dialogue, Black Sea Economic Cooperation, Caspian Summits and the Central Asia Regional  
42 Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and China's  
43 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are the latest examples of such groupings. These cooperative  
44 organisations serve a number of security and economic purposes and are platforms to build and  
45 maintain norms in the wider Eurasian region (Kalra and Saxena 2007, 2015).

### 53 54 **Central Eurasian Categories of Analysis**

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56 Geography in large part has dictated the position in which these communities and states find  
57 themselves in, that is the heart of Eurasia. Any reading of Central Eurasian history places it well  
58 in the midst of facing multiple challenges (invaders, earthquakes and climate change) over  
59 centuries. The history of the region introduces meaning in the behaviour of these so called 'in-  
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3 between' nations that echoes the past and yet serves as rhythms for the future (Saxena 2019,  
4 Preface). The two categories of analysis of Eurasia and Empire together explain the emergence of  
5 an identity that evolved from a connected Eurasian landscape and makes the region inherently  
6 resilient in the face of challenges. These categories also serve to illustrate the making of Central  
7 Eurasian societies via the processes of intercalation, reminiscent of multiple understandings and  
8 belongings established over time through strongly interacting groups, cultures and peoples.  
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### 11 Eurasia as a unit of analysis

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14 Eurasia, straddling Asia and Europe, covers roughly 36.2% of the Earth's surface. It includes  
15 Central Eurasian countries, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and  
16 Uzbekistan among post-Soviet states and parts of neighbouring countries. Land connectivity is, in  
17 many cases, the only way that these countries can get their goods and products out into the global  
18 market as they are landlocked and, in the instance of Uzbekistan, doubly landlocked. It is important  
19 to point out that the idea of Eurasia is separate from Russocentric (Kotkin 2007), Kazakhstani  
20 (Mostafa 2013), Turkish (Akçali and Perinçek 2009) or any other such Eurasianism. The basis for  
21 talking about Eurasia here is not to call on a political or cultural understanding of Eurasia, but  
22 rather offer a geographical and historical underpinning of the region of Central Eurasia. It is clear  
23 that over a period of time, medieval empires (nomadic and European) and the Soviet experience  
24 established a repeated reciprocal typification in the region that has led to stable conceptions of self  
25 and the other for Central Eurasian societies (Wendt 1992, 405). The raw materials of understanding  
26 the self and the other were already in place in 1991 and can help further the understanding of  
27 peaceful change in the region (Dadabaev and Heathershaw 2020). Not only do the communities  
28 in the region have a long history of interacting with each other as discussed above but they also  
29 have a specific language to understand each other. What lay underneath the Soviet division of  
30 Central Eurasia was a Turko-Persianate-Islamicate-Mongol world order, mentioned above, that  
31 created mutually intelligible identities and modes of interaction (Canfield 1991). Canfield used a  
32 Greek term, *Ecumene*, to denote Central Eurasia as a 'historically perpetuated complex of  
33 meaningful forms' and a 'world of shared understandings' (Canfield 1991, xiii). Together these  
34 aspects of society represent the basis of behaviour and practice even today highlighting processes  
35 of intercalation in Central Eurasia.  
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43 Eurasia, articulating a specific geographic zone, can offer a more inclusive category of  
44 understanding. It explains cooperation and collaboration as the backbone of community and state  
45 living in the region. The Eurasian ecology, encompassing the steppe, Tundra, wet lowlands, forests  
46 and deserts, gave rise to diverse peoples that have a particular relationship with their environment  
47 and each other (Kotkin 2007, 499). The diverse polities of Eurasia exerted pressure on each other  
48 throughout history that led to modes of interactions that connected the known world in multiple  
49 ways (Abu-Lughod 1989). However, these became concealed by Western imperialism of the  
50 nineteenth-twentieth centuries (Robinson 2007). Many of these interactions date further back than  
51 any European contact with either China or Central Eurasia and continue well into the nineteenth  
52 century. In order to capture the motivations of these people, it is essential to follow their particular  
53 historical path and avoid the mistakes of giving meaning to their actions that are alien to them.  
54 Very much like the sedentary narratives that belie nomadic-sedentary civilisational contact and  
55 action, European understandings ignore the importance of Eurasian connectedness, and the post-  
56 Cold war American led world order sees Central Eurasia through the prism of Russia, and now  
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3 China. Taken together, they give a distorted view of the region and perpetuate misunderstandings.  
4 The other papers in this volume touch on the different philosophical, intellectual (Chandler) and  
5 religious underpinnings that maintained these conditions of connectedness. From the smallest  
6 atom of the self to the largest community, and the nation-state, the wider Eurasian region has its  
7 own lexicon of institutions, connected living spaces and understanding of the immediate  
8 (neighbours) and the distant (international) other.  
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12 Central Eurasian history removed from the diluted visions of either purely sedentary  
13 and/or colonial worldviews can instil meaning in the actions and practices of actors in the region  
14 today. This has implications for both external and internal practice. Here external implies relations  
15 with the western world: US and Europe but also with Outer Eurasia (Russia and China), while  
16 internal implies interactions between Central Eurasian states and the communities that lie within.  
17 It is precisely the historic interactions between nomadic-sedentary civilisations in medieval empires  
18 that need to be taken into account before giving meaning to state or community action and  
19 behaviour (Wendt 1992). In other words, Europe and Asia view each other in specific ways based  
20 on centuries of interactions; however, nation-states like that of Central Eurasia are too often unable  
21 to participate in the mirror-image theory of identity formation directly (Wendt 1992, 407). They  
22 have appeared in scholarship and politics through proxy in time and space: China, pre-Islamic  
23 Persia, Islamic world, Russia and the Soviet Union, and now modern Russia and China. This  
24 identity formation imbues characteristics in Central Eurasian state actors and communities that do  
25 not always belong to them but are borrowed or expanded from their seemingly more significant  
26 and powerful neighbours in history and the modern era, respectively. However, within Eurasia  
27 there are heuristic tools of empire (Chinggisid Mongol for instance) and Inner Eurasia (Christian  
28 1994) that provide meaning and practice for identity formation and behaviour significant for the  
29 present. The rules of engagement have a basis in historical interactions and behaviours that carry  
30 meanings that have been at play over a long time and even include partnerships between  
31 pastoralists and agriculturalists in antiquity (Rouse 2020, 400). In terms of governance, both  
32 sustainable and reliable, it is thus essential to view the features that have helped create communities  
33 of peoples in the region. These characteristics include a tendency toward cooperation,  
34 collaboration and co-optation, borne out of geographical and ecological exigencies.  
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#### 42 Empires as a unit of analysis

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45 Historians have long questioned the significance of using the nation-state as a unit of analysis  
46 because it dictates the recording of events in the twenty-first century in very specific and often  
47 alien ways for a large swathe of humanity. David Christian's regional analysis of Inner Eurasia  
48 juxtaposed with Outer Eurasia is a worthy attempt at shifting the lens from the nation-state in the  
49 region (Christian 1994). In his rendering of events, the focus shifts to the nomad and the steppe  
50 and lends a political coherence to the region that rests in geography and ecology to give rise to  
51 certain types of empires (Christian 1994, 175). His analysis bridges the history of Central Eurasia  
52 all the way from antiquity to the Soviet Union and, counter-intuitively, brings the impact of Central  
53 Eurasia on Outer Eurasia (China and Russia) to the fore. Furthermore, this shared legacy,  
54 explained primarily through the unit of empire, is confirmed by Robinson's work on Mughal,  
55 Safavid and Ottoman empires in wider Eurasia (Robinson 1997). Specifically, these empires  
56 accommodated multiple belongings and understandings: cultural, political and economic, and  
57 shared connective knowledge systems (formal learning and esoteric understandings), commercial  
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3 organisation and techniques of trade (Robinson 1997, 151). These multi-civilizational, multi-ethnic  
4 and polyglot empires of the steppe signify monumental shifts in world history but have been  
5 superseded by European hegemonic discourses. Significantly, the interplay between nomadic and  
6 sedentary institutions within these particular empires created conditions that nourished adaptability  
7 in governance, openness to ideas, and a mixed economy that accommodated agriculture,  
8 pastoralism and trade across the large expanse of Eurasia (Kalra 2018). Taken together, the  
9 exigencies (climactic, civilisational, religious, cultural and political) the region was exposed to  
10 through history help explain the adaptability of communities within Central Eurasia to withstand  
11 shocks and challenges by utilising connected spaces where disparate groups interacted.  
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16 Central Eurasians positioned themselves between or among existing elements of different  
17 civilisational contacts, both nomadic and sedentary. Yet they were able to retain properties and  
18 perceptions of themselves and the other in a stable yet flexible manner to create robust societies.  
19 This meant that society could function with a ruling elite of Persian and later Turkic descent over  
20 diverse ethnic populations, use Persian in government and Arabic in formal religious settings, and  
21 showcase power and leadership in specific ways. Consequently, Central Eurasian societies  
22 exhibited layered understandings and practices in line with strongly interacting elements. This  
23 shared ecosystem, where each element and society impacted governance proved more efficient,  
24 and thus reliable. In other words, different groups in wider Eurasia could continue to function in  
25 familiar ways whether sedentary or nomadic, and yet have spaces of interaction that improved  
26 rather than impeded development. For example, Central Eurasians were integral to the functioning  
27 of the thirteenth century Mongol Empire in Eurasia as traders, governors and bureaucrats. They  
28 were able to speak multiple languages and exist in a wide variety of spaces and synthesised what  
29 we call today a complex adaptive system exhibiting strategies that proved resilient for them and  
30 for their communities. They created capacity in order to fashion positions of influence in  
31 government, business and in the maintenance of a vibrant cultural milieu that came to  
32 simultaneously represent pre-Islamic, Islamic, Turkic as well as Mongol in medieval Eurasia. As a  
33 result, Central Eurasia functioned as the host society within which strongly interacting elements,  
34 such as different religions, ethnic groups and races, found resonance and contributed to instilling  
35 meaning and significance.  
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43 This was somewhat disrupted by Tsarist Russia when it introduced a systematised and  
44 bureaucratised government in Central Eurasia beginning in the nineteenth century. The  
45 Directorate of Turkestan began to transform a society based on Islamic law, deeply integrated with  
46 the cultural principles of society and the place of the individual within it. The move away from  
47 personalised relationships and cultural contexts especially in small Muslim communities like those  
48 in Central Eurasia created ruptures in state-citizen relationships precisely because the local milieu  
49 was dismissed as traditional, and thus redundant. However, Central Eurasian societies found  
50 avenues of belongings, for example through participation in Sufi orders. Often Sufi saints  
51 performed the role of facilitators and translators of this new modernity. With their help, Muslim  
52 societies were able to adapt to the changing modes of communication, education, knowledge  
53 production and lived experience. These Sufi orders were able to bridge the gap between a society  
54 based on personalistic relationships and an impersonal automated European state, whose main  
55 aim was control (Leibeskind 1998, 12, 28). This same relationship was reproduced in the Soviet  
56 Union where, for example, citizens of Uzbek SSR learned to be Uzbek and Soviet, simultaneously  
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3 finding a balance by establishing new meanings of belonging with the help of writers and  
4 intellectuals (Hirsch 2000; Shin 2015; Khalid 2015). These interactions imbued their own logic,  
5 language and modes of understanding which are still visible in modern Central Eurasian states  
6 today confirming how strongly interacting elements continue to be performative in these societies.  
7 While Chandler (2014, 49) refers to this as producing order through self-organisation on the basis  
8 of interactive processes, Wendt (1992, 407) refers to these as collective meanings that are always  
9 in process but are constitutive of identity and interests.  
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### 12 13 **Eurasian Reconnect and Emergent Coherence** 14

15 Central Eurasian society, well versed with polyglot and multi-ethnic empires of the past from the  
16 Xiong-nu, Mongols and subsequent Khanates, holds within its historical experience an arsenal of  
17 repositories of practice that 'act as locus around which varied performances of power politics are  
18 created' (Neumann and Wigen 2018, 9). More specifically, the role played by Central Eurasian  
19 societies and individuals in the administration and economy in the medieval period made them the  
20 real movers and shakers of the Eurasian world and is illustrative of their resilience. They acted as  
21 ministers, governors, administrators, traders and translators for the ruling nomadic elites and  
22 provided the interface with neighbouring sedentary polities. As traders, they had access to dense  
23 networks spread across the Eurasian region important not only for economic reasons but also for  
24 reasons of conquest and expansion (Kalra 2020). Having knowledge of diverse societies coupled  
25 with information about trade routes and relationships stretching back centuries, Central Eurasian  
26 communities served as the nodes of contact that nomadic empires *and* sedentary polities relied on  
27 for exchange. This not only guaranteed access to places of honour and influence in court but  
28 represented leverage and real agency. Partnerships between rulers and their Central Eurasian  
29 consultants and administrators reached an apex in the Mongol Empire of exchange (Kotkin 2007).  
30 What followed were intensely strong interactions (intercalation) that were natural breeding grounds  
31 for the emergence of a complex adaptive system and resilience-thinking that could withstand shock  
32 and still flourish.  
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39 The main element to be emphasised here is the importance given to connectivity that  
40 ensured mobility, exchange and access to a wide array of resources. This brings us to the strategy  
41 that we refer to as the desire for connectedness that is the building block for resilient communities  
42 in this region, one that has been founded on the principles of the processes of intercalation. The  
43 connectedness of Central Eurasian communities, physical, economic and social, implies a shared  
44 space that underscores meaning and understanding. Scott Levi weaves together a narrative of the  
45 shared history of Central Eurasia as connectivity that persisted even in the face of European  
46 colonisation and the perceived decline of the Silk Road(s) (Levi 2020). The economies of Central  
47 Eurasia and trade in the region continued to flourish even when maritime trade was seen as  
48 usurping the bulk of trade in the world. Levi cites the exchange of information especially in matters  
49 of trade and commerce along with the continued support of physical and institutional  
50 infrastructure (financing of projects and provision of security) and other policies that could be  
51 seen across the wider Eurasian space: Central Eurasia, Iran and even India in the sixteenth-  
52 seventeenth centuries (Levi 2020, 77-78). The tools of understanding Central Eurasia need to  
53 accommodate these medieval empires (nomadic) and their partners (Central Eurasian polities) to  
54 understand the importance of connectivity in the region.  
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3 In addition, the lived experience of the Soviet Union also determined behaviour and  
4 practice towards keeping the region connected. The Soviet Union standardised national  
5 infrastructure and set up transnational infrastructure, economic relations and ways of behaving  
6 that have outlasted dissolution, albeit with disruptions (Kotkin 2007, 525). While the rules of  
7 engagement underwent a transformation, the borders of Central Eurasian nation-states and the  
8 nationalisms encouraged in Soviet times continue to inform communities and state actors in the  
9 region. The identity and behaviours associated with the republics played out later as these countries  
10 became sovereign nations with minor fluctuations (Kudaibergenova 2020). There was also an  
11 almost immediate attempt at reconnecting the region after 1991, which showcases cooperation as  
12 a strategy for resilience in the region. Specifically, in the modern era and the current world order,  
13 the nation-state is the main actor that exercises the will of the people and thus its participation in  
14 macro level regional organisations is of interest here.  
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### 19 Regional Cooperation in the Modern Era

21 How do we understand the emergence of a number of cooperative organisations in the region?  
22 Theories of international relations applied to post-Soviet Central Eurasia have too often used  
23 rationalism and/or reflectivism to explain behaviour and practice (Kalra and Saxena 2007;  
24 Dadabaev and Heathershaw 2020). One of the more comprehensive explanations has been the  
25 category of ‘protective integration’. Allison applies the term to explain the motivations of Central  
26 Eurasian states joining organisations like SCO and CSTO. These motivations include primarily the  
27 means to enhance sovereignty, regime security, stability and legitimacy. The continued  
28 participation in meetings of collective organisations in the region provides what social  
29 constructivists call normative-framework building opportunities (Allison 2018, 298). Participation  
30 in these organisations justify and legitimate domestic political practices and sustain a conservative  
31 sovereignty-focused normative framework. They build and reinforce collective identities through  
32 socialisation practices in these meetings and in doing so confirm bonds of ‘statist, sovereignty  
33 focused norms’ (Allison 2018, 309). However, this application of protective integration from a  
34 security perspective, while acknowledging the support of such macro level organisations for norm  
35 making behaviour and practice for security purposes, fails to see how these organisations serve as  
36 avenues for negotiation that take into account local needs (economic and social) at the same time.  
37 The increasingly complex world poses severe challenges to livelihood, especially when means of  
38 exchanges that are so important for these communities are truncated due to international borders,  
39 undue customs regimes or state level threats. In these circumstances, it is essential to highlight  
40 interactions in the past where these communities have tended toward cooperation and  
41 collaboration. In doing so, we reiterate the ways in which this region has withstood changes and  
42 come out resilient. It locates the basis of resilient thinking in historic interactions that unfolded on  
43 the large expanse of Eurasia over millennia.  
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### 52 Eurasian Economic Union and the BRI

54 At this juncture we must turn to the most recent of such initiatives: the Eurasian Economic Union  
55 (EAEU) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Much has been said about the two initiatives in  
56 scholarly literature, from positioning them as anti-Western, hegemonic, establishing spheres of  
57 influence and linking up with Europe and Asia-Pacific in the longer term and in the international  
58 global arena. The EAEU has been seen as Moscow’s attempt at creating a Greater Europe  
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3 (Vinokurov 2014); bridging economic and political ideals (Propescu 2014); regional integration  
4 leading to external borders (Safranchuk 2015); President Vladimir Putin's project, 'pole' in  
5 international politics, a historic moment challenging the unipolar world order with civilisational  
6 contacts as the bedrock of coming together. Similarly, the BRI has been called a tool of soft power  
7 and diplomacy (Kratz 2015; Shambaugh 2015); China's external economic policy (Callahan 2016;  
8 Ferdinand 2016; Summers 2016); a means for win-win cooperation (Wang 2015; Liu 2015);  
9 President Xi Jinping's assertion in China's domestic policy; a reassertion of the traditional Silk  
10 Road and China's Marshall Plan. In terms of the influence that Russia and China have on Central  
11 Eurasia, the EAEU and the BRI are the predominant frames of analysis at present. Scholars have  
12 opined that the EAEU and BRI are being used to create spheres of influence, one with a spatial  
13 (Russia) logic, and the other with a functional (China) logic (Kaczmanski 2017, 1040).  
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18 The analysis, however, remains welded to the big powers and the lack of agency on the  
19 part of Central Eurasia is palpable. Kazakhstan and even Azerbaijan are reduced to being  
20 essentially connecting points between Europe and China (Kaczmanski 2017, 1038) bringing to  
21 bear the mistakes of the past (Levi 2020). While it is easy to see that Russia and China are  
22 positioned to benefit from these developments, it is essential to acknowledge that Central Eurasian  
23 countries have consistently entered on a voluntarily basis and more significantly initiated regional  
24 organisations and groupings which, in their own words, give them an equal platform, enable access  
25 to international markets, and are places to renegotiate their relationships with their neighbours  
26 (Vanderhill et al. 2020; Dadabaev and Heathershaw 2020). However, the current analysis and  
27 scholarly engagement with the region continues to overwhelmingly represent Central Eurasian  
28 countries as trapped and having little to no agency. Whether it is the New Great Game playing out  
29 between the US and China, or the resurgence of the concept of the Silk Road(s), Central Eurasia  
30 remains on the periphery even when it is the object of interest.  
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36 Seen from a historic perspective, the BRI offers bilateral and multilateral interaction on  
37 the historic Silk Road(s) and reflects connectivity in the region which has stretched back centuries.  
38 It is premised on the notion of comprehensive development for Eurasia, which has the potential  
39 to benefit China along with the other countries along the Silk Road(s) (Kalra 2019). This needs to  
40 be viewed in conjunction with how cooperation based on inclusivity is the cornerstone of foreign  
41 policy directives of countries in the region. For example, Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy  
42 and Turkmenistan's policy of neutrality (Mammedov 2020) are both examples of Central Eurasian  
43 countries finding their own language of inclusiveness to engage with the outside world. They are  
44 both premised on inclusivity, not exclusivity by their own admission. However, the civilisational  
45 conflict between Russia and the so-called West (Europe, UK and the US) and/or now China and  
46 the West make Central Eurasian countries the real losers. No matter who actually proposes an  
47 idea, it is seen as coming from without even in the face of facts and empirical evidence. In 1994,  
48 the First President of Kazakhstan, N. Nazarbayev, suggested the creation of a Eurasian Union  
49 with freedom of movement and free trade across the Eurasian space. Nazarbayev during his time  
50 as President (1990-2019) continued to express Eurasian ideas with Astana (now Nursultan), not  
51 Moscow as the centre (Kalra & Saxena 2015). However, the Eurasian Economic Union is seen *only*  
52 as a Russian (read President Vladimir Putin's) project (Kalra 2020b). It is important to note that  
53 President Putin's (2000-2008; 2012-Current) pivot towards Asia and/or 'Look East' policy was  
54 announced as late as 2010 (Bakare 2020; Sakwa 2018). Similarly, in the case of the BRI, President  
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3 Xi Jinping's announcement of the BRI in Kazakhstan in 2015 is mentioned in passing and is widely  
4 seen as another attempt at garnering Chinese influence with little to no regard for Kazakhstan's  
5 agency.  
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### 7 8 Central Eurasian Agency 9

10 The inability to see the countries of Central Eurasia as countries with their own interests and  
11 motivations as driving forces makes Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and all the other countries of Central  
12 Eurasia objects to be acted upon. The reality on the ground is that the economies of Central  
13 Eurasia are institutionally and infrastructurally connected with Russia and it serves as an important  
14 labour and consumer market destination, while China is the biggest economic partner in the region  
15 since the early 2000s and a major investor in infrastructure projects. With the oil pipeline  
16 connecting China-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan, exit routes from the region have  
17 diversified to go beyond relying solely on Russia, and there is further investment in roads, land  
18 ports and other land infrastructure to expand trade in Eurasia from which the Central Eurasian  
19 countries will also benefit (Kazczmarski 2017, 1036). The interconnections between and with the  
20 economies in the region are as important to domestic economies for their own sake, as for the  
21 larger global network (Kuchins et al. 2015). As in medieval times, one of the main reasons for the  
22 unprecedented success of the Mongols (thirteenth century) was infrastructure support,  
23 institutional and physical, that linked micro economies (carpet making, textiles, pottery) of Central  
24 Eurasia to the rest of the known world at the time (Abu-Lughod 1989; Marsden & Hopkins 2019;  
25 Kalra 2018, 2020). Levi (2020), Cosmo (1994), Ciociltan (2012), Prazinak (2010), Kolbas (2006),  
26 Martinez (2009) and others speak of the connectedness of the Eurasian space as a forerunner to  
27 prosperity and influence. They report that 'the Mongols integrated Eurasia on an unprecedented  
28 scale, a globalisation of the Old World that contributed to the discovery of the New World and  
29 helped shape the early modern period' (Biran 2015, 535). In this endeavour, the role of Central  
30 Eurasian traders and administrators cannot be overstated. They had the knowledge of polities,  
31 societies and trade networks necessary for this economic transformation. The Mongol trade  
32 juggernaut was no less an outcome of Central Eurasian ingenuity than the steppe tradition brought  
33 by the Mongol Khans (Kalra 2020a). The unique geographical location inhabited by Central  
34 Eurasians allowed them to function as interlocutors, mediators and translators and connected the  
35 vastness of the Eurasian space. Relationships thus formed between Central Eurasia and their  
36 neighbouring Russian and Chinese communities date back centuries and continue to be important  
37 and necessary.  
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47 Wendt's approach to identity formation and his use of the concept of intentional  
48 transformation applies to the countries of Central Eurasia precisely because it can identify the  
49 nation-states in the region through the lens of their own (not European) historical path  
50 dependence. It locates the elements of community and state locally, while at the same time  
51 acknowledging a cooperative world order as an end goal. These two assumptions are in line with  
52 the historical understanding of the region whereby Central Eurasia has withstood a number of  
53 shocks and found that connectivity introduces flows into a system that help it rebalance under  
54 threat. In the context of the VUCA world and consequent resilience thinking, it becomes  
55 imperative to refer to the natural proclivity of small communities (Central Eurasia) inhabiting a  
56 vast expanse (Eurasia) to find the basis of identity, behaviour and practice, well within the  
57 paradigm of cooperation.  
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## Inherent Resilience and the Process of Intercalation

The Eurasian narrative with medieval empires at the centre is a story unlike one told from a Sinocentric, Russocentric or Eurocentric perspective. At its heart are the intersections of Turkic, Iranian and other peoples of Central Eurasia who have inhabited diverse ecological environments and see connectivity as a benefit not an impediment or threat. These strategies have been centuries in the making and have at their core inter-civilisational contact in all spheres: political, economic and social. Beginning with the nomadic, semi-sedentary, and sedentary civilizations that included contact with Chinese, Persian, and Islamic worlds, Turko-Mongol empires, European colonial powers, the Tsarist Russian Empire and ending with the Soviet Union. The countries of Central Eurasia have lived through multiple world systems and withstood shocks, unpredictability and challenges which can be referred to as multiple VUCA worlds. Central Eurasia was the place where steppe traditions met with sedentary traditions (China, pre-Islamic Persia) to be translated, acculturated, modified and even codified (McChesney 2009, 278; Rouse 2020, 399-400). These spaces and communities served as the nodal points linking disparate civilisations and became zones for transmission of cultural values that came to represent their in-between nature and the accommodation of a diverse set of practices. Rather than disappearing into the east or the west, Europe or Asia, or any such seemingly opposing categories, Central Eurasia has within its history the tools to operate in all of them (Gleason 2003, 3). These communities have developed erudite ways through their exposure to strongly interacting systems (intercalation) that have created layered understandings of themselves and the other. They have performed and practiced resilience through these interactions that accommodate the past to curate a connected future. This requires immediate recognition because it came about through centuries of interactions, negotiations and exchanges. Even in the modern era, as part of the Soviet Union, Central Eurasia represented a place where different ideologies (political and economic) collided, yet found compromise. In terms of resilient communities and the larger global conversations concerning international orders and debates about decolonisation, Central Eurasian countries serve as noteworthy examples. They can either be understood from the perspective that finally recognises their roles in world history or they can continue to be ignored to perpetuate great power politics and ensuing misunderstandings.

The building blocks of the Eurasian narrative are found in the expanse of empires, not the confines of nation-states. Central Eurasian states and communities continue to be resilient mainly through reconnecting and finding spaces for interactions that overcome differences. Connectivity has served Central Eurasia well in their past encounters with multiple *others* (Chinese, Persians, Arabs, Mongols and even Russians). If in the medieval period, traders and merchants proved to be successful translators in fashioning a Turko-Mongol empire of great purport (Kalra 2020a), in the colonial period, there were instances of Sufi saints and leaders facilitating and translating European modernity that challenged the traditional relationship between state and citizen (Leibeskind 1998, 12, 28). These examples point to the capacity within Central Eurasia to find those interlocutors time and again to help navigate external shocks and come out resilient and stronger. In the modern era, these interlocutors exist at various levels in the community and at state level. They find those *connectivities* whether through participating in macro level organisations, building physical and institutional infrastructure, or community interactions and exchanges that in many cases represent the entirety of economic functions locally. These represent the ways in which

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3 intercalation processes unfolded in Central Eurasia and how these societies have time and again  
4 played host to strongly interacting elements.  
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7 To return to the idea of resilience as a quality and an analytic of governance in the case of  
8 Central Eurasia means to use the category of connectedness beyond territoriality and sovereignty  
9 (Wendt 1992, 402) in understanding the region. A connectedness that emerged out of geography  
10 and history in the first place is visible today in the modern era through participation in collective  
11 initiatives and organisations. It is one of the more reliable means to instil meaning in behaviour  
12 and practice of Eurasian polities in view of the historical trajectory of the region. Unlike the  
13 homogenous state system that Waltz (1979) believed was the international arena of the modern  
14 era, it is the diversity within the global order that needs acknowledgement today, with a view  
15 towards accepting a variety of strong states operating together in a shared space. Concepts of good  
16 life and resilience are, at their core, contested because the 'local' can never be homogenous.  
17 However, what is increasingly clear is that the understanding of the various 'locals' that together  
18 make-up the 'global' is the need of the hour. With this in mind, this article hopes to leave the  
19 reader with a better understanding of the necessity of different categories of analysis in the pursuit  
20 of understanding how Eurasian communities underwent processes of intercalation and carry  
21 within them an inherent resilience.  
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