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Caroline Putri Pratama

*Seoul National University University of Indonesia*, pratama.caroline@yahoo.com

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# Central Asia as a Regional Security Complex from the Perspectives of Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism

Caroline Putri Pratama

Alumni Departemen Ilmu Hubungan Internasional Universitas Indonesia

E-mail: [pratama.caroline@yahoo.com](mailto:pratama.caroline@yahoo.com)

## **Abstrak**

*Tulisan ini bertujuan menganalisis kawasan Asia Tengah, dilihat dari perspektif Realisme, Liberalisme dan Konstruktivisme, melalui teori Regional Security Complex oleh Barry Buzan dan Ole Waever. Teori ini hendak menunjukkan keamanan regional berdasarkan interdependensi antar unit dalam kawasan dilihat dari struktur power dan proses sekuritisasi di dalamnya, demikian pola hubungan keamanan dalam kawasan Asia Tengah berusaha dijelaskan dengan elemen-elemen dari ketiga paradigma yang terdapat dalam teori tersebut. Hasil analisis tulisan ini menunjukkan bahwa Asia Tengah dipandang sebagai bentuk insecurity interdependence by external forces dari perspektif Realis, security interdependence by interest dari perspektif Liberalis dan securitization interdependence by understanding of threat/security dari perspektif Konstruktivis. Kompleks keamanan Asia Tengah termasuk dalam tipe kompleks keamanan Great Power, terlihat dari peran besar kekuatan-kekuatan eksternal terutama Rusia dan Cina dalam kawasan tersebut; baik dalam pembentukan pola pertemanan dengan kerjasama, pola permusuhan dengan persaingan dan ketakutan, juga proses sekuritisasi isu separatisme, ekstremisme dan terorisme sebagai ancaman terhadap keamanan regional. Tulisan ini diambil dari tugas karya akhir penulis yang diajukan untuk mendapatkan gelar Sarjana Sosial dari Departemen Ilmu Hubungan Internasional, Universitas Indonesia.*

## **Kata Kunci**

*Kawasan Asia Tengah, teori Regional Security Complex, keamanan regional, pola hubungan keamanan, kompleks keamanan tipe Great Power, Kazakstan, Kirgistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Rusia, Cina, Amerika Serikat.*

## **Introduction**

Despite of analysis in state or system level of analysis offered by Classical Realism and Nerealism respectively, the dynamics of security in International Relations could also be analyzed in the regional level. The Regional Security Complex theory by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever shows that the analysis of security dynamics in regional level would be able to capture a more comprehensive picture of the pattern of security relations within the region, and also the interplay between them with states outside the region, including their relations with the great powers and/or superpowers in the global level.<sup>1</sup> This article would try to view the regional security complex from the lenses of three paradigms in International Relations studies; Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism. Specifically discussing the Central Asian region, the analysis of each paradigms would be based on the four levels of analysis found in

the theory, which are (1) the domestically generated vulnerabilities found in the states within the region, (2) the relations between the states within the region, (3) the region's interaction with the neighboring regions (in this case, the Caucasus and South Asia), and (4) the roles of external powers (in this case, Russia, China and the United States) in the region.<sup>2</sup> These four levels of analysis would be able to enlighten the essential structure of a regional security complex; the geographical boundaries, anarchic structure, polarity or the distribution of power, and the patterns of amity or enmity<sup>3</sup>, which then determines the type of the Central Asian security complex.<sup>4</sup>

### **Central Asia as a Regional Security Complex**

The construction and development of the security conditions in Central Asia could be traced from its historical and geographical roots. The historical fact that the states of Central Asia; namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; was previously part of the communist Soviet Union, shows a similar pattern of authoritarianism in each of the governmental conditions of the, then, newly-formed states in the region.<sup>5</sup> Not to mention the placement of the head of states in each country who were previously government officials of the Union and were supporting the Stalin's purpose to halt Islam or pan-Turkic nationalism in the area<sup>6</sup> (which held the majority of Muslim population in the Union)<sup>7</sup>, this so-called 'legacy' of the Union has elongated the milieu of authoritarianism and prolonged the conditions of economic downturn, the spread of crime and corruption, also the rise of reformation movements based on Islamic fundamentalism and extremism, in the states of Central Asia<sup>8</sup>. Another concern adding to it is terrorist group movements supported by the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, which strengthened the religious extremism in the Central Asian region.<sup>9</sup> The geographical factors which also contributed to the security conditions in Central Asia was also related to the legacy of the Soviet rule, by whom the demarcation line was considered and decided<sup>10</sup>. Ethnic or ethno-nationalist conflicts within the region was one of the results of the decision<sup>11</sup>, as well as water-resource conflict, since the area is arid<sup>12</sup>. The Central Asian region has also been known of its strategic eminence as the area is rich of oil and gas, previously exploited under the Soviet era.<sup>13</sup> In present time, the resources possessed by the region has attracted external powers, such as the United States, China and Russia, with their similar main interest to fulfill its energy demand. This will be further elaborated on the discussion of external powers' role in the region from the three perspectives chosen in this paper to view the Central Asian security complex.

Thus, main security concerns found in the region are the domestic political instabilities within the states, which triggered calls to reformation mostly from religious extremist groups, and separatism from ethno-nationalist groups trying to come back to states in which their ethnics are majority of; with movements spread all over the states within Central Asia; and also the potential great power rivalry on energy within the region.

### **Realism Viewing the Central Asian Security Complex**

The pattern of enmity, seen from history of conflicts or current conflictual relations between actors, also the structure of power within the region, is the element of Realism which can be found in the Regional Security Complex theory. From the four levels of analysis mentioned in the theory, it was discovered that the domestic security problems within the states of Central Asia were related to the pattern of enmity and fear within the region, with the neighboring regions and the external powers involved in the regional interaction.

The main problem which threatened the domestic security of the states in this region, as discussed previously, is the call to reformation and separatism, which, as a whole, might affect the existence of the Central Asian states. As the governmental system found in the Central Asian states are still totalitarian, then the threat to political authorities in the states are considered as threats to the states themselves. Not only that those problems mentioned are domestic vulnerabilities found in the states, the similarity of the threats between the states of Central Asia has made the threats as a regional threat to Central Asia, since every states has the same pattern of fear over the same threats.

As for the pattern of enmity between the states of Central Asia, the history of conflict between the states has not resulted to any open conflict or war, or restraints in the relations between the Central Asian states in the post-Cold War era. Although there had been history of conflicts on water resources and state borders involving Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the tension did not erupt to a large-scale war between the states<sup>14</sup>, nor does it inflict the relations of the states afterwards. Generally, the states in Central Asia had shown no strong enmities or tensions towards each other. This less-conflictual atmosphere within the states, then, shows lack of patterns of enmity.

The same condition can be said in the relations between the Central Asian region and its neighboring regions, the Caucasus and South Asia, since there has not been found any conflicts between states in the respective regions. The support of terrorist groups in Afghanistan, which is part of South Asia, towards the religious extremists groups in Central

Asia carried the potentiality of conflictual relations between them, but there has not been any open conflicts found regarding this problem.

The pattern of enmity in Central Asia was clearly found in the involvement of external powers in the region, namely Russia and China as “great powers”, and the United States as “superpower”, according to Buzan and Waever’s classification of global powers<sup>15</sup>. These three powers has been trying to influence, and maintain its influence, in the region by interacting with the states within the region, mainly motivated by their strategic interests (which is the need of energy resources, be it from Russia, China or the United States)<sup>16</sup>, or simply because they have no intention in leaving Central Asia, as a region, dominated only by one single power (this has been the case of the United States<sup>17</sup>)—thus, the pattern of enmity prominent in the region, is the rivalries between Russia, China and the United States to influence and gain power over the states in Central Asia. As there had been no states which was agreed upon as a regional power within Central Asia (although Kazakhstan has the potential to become a regional power—since it has been rich of strategic resources, more than what the other Central Asian states possess—yet it had not any dominating influence in the regional polarity), and that there have been strong involvements from the three external powers in the region, shown in its efforts to maintain each of their influence in shaping the regional security conditions, then it could be seen that there is an **“insecurity interdependence”** by the contestation of external powers in this region.

### **Liberalism Viewing the Central Asian Security Complex**

The element of Liberalism focuses more on the pattern of amity in each of the four levels of analysis in the Regional Security Complex theory, indicated in the cooperation and the formations of institutions in order to maximize security, which is the common interest of the units within the region, or the external units interacting with the region. That security is a common interest, according to the perspective of Liberalism, showed that there is a “security interdependence” within the units. As for the case of Central Asia where there is a similarity in its units’ interest for security, this part of the writing will cover the patterns of amity shown from the regional cooperations within the states of the region, and other regional cooperations with neighboring regions and the external powers interacting with Central Asia.

As mentioned in the previous explanations on the security problems of Central Asia, the states within the region have similarities in their domestic security problems, which made them as a regional security problem. Responding to the problems, cooperative approaches to solve the concerns are more prominently seen than the approach of conflict, since there are

more security institutions formed within the region than records of war and conflict. The security institutions operating in the region are: (1) CIS (*Commonwealth of Independent States*), a security organization formed by Russia with member states which are previously part of the Soviet Union, having the purpose to settle the conflicts in Central Asia and the to form a joint commando to the establishment of the CIS armed forces and border troops, and also to have bilateral agreements on friendship and security between Russia and the Central Asian states<sup>18</sup>, (2) CSTO (*Collective Security Treaty Organization*), which is more of a military alliance initiated by Russia which conducts annual operations and joint military exercises<sup>19</sup>, and, as of currently, have been spreading its cooperation to solve issues such as drug-trafficking and terrorism which have been developing in Central Asia and the Caucasus<sup>20</sup>, (3) SCO (*Shanghai Cooperation Organization*) whose formation was initiated by China and Russia to respond border problems<sup>21</sup>, but since its settlement has also been exerting efforts to secure Central Asia from separatism, religious extremism and terrorism, and also has been cooperating with Afghanistan in terrorism, drug-trafficking and organized transnational crime<sup>22</sup>, and (4) NATO PfP (*NATO Partnership for Peace*), initiated by the United States as part of its global strategy to form the regional security of Central Asia and serve as a civilian democratic control over the military<sup>23</sup>. In contrast to the other institutions, the NATO PfP was more inclined to show the presence of the United States in Central Asia and has less intentions in tackling the regional security problems faced by the region.

From the above explanation, it could be seen that the similarity in security interests within the region, and also from states involved in it created a common security interest which was tried to be achieved by cooperation, shown from the emergence of security institutions in Central Asia. Although the formation of the security institutions listed were all initiated by the external powers (Russia, China and the United States), in contrast to Realism which saw this as a form of power penetration or domination by the external powers over the states of Central Asia, Liberalism viewed that the same security interests between the actors in the region had become a meeting point which started the security-based interactions in Central Asia. Thus, based on the internalisation of “ally” role for the beneficial relations between the actors involved in the interactions in Central Asia, it could be concluded that there is a form of “**security interdependence**” by interests in the Central Asia regional security complex.

### **Constructivism Viewing the Central Asian Security Complex**

Constructivism in the Regional Security Complex theory viewed the construction of the idea of security through the process of securitization (an act of labeling of issues which

are also to be claimed included as a security issue or defined as threat<sup>24</sup>) in a regional security complex. As the security agenda or sectors were securitized by different actors, then each regions in the system would have different security agenda, which are categorized based on which sectors are of more importance.<sup>25</sup> The process of securitization, then, would show the uniqueness of a regional security complex, compared to other complexes.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to the previous paradigms which focused more on the material aspect of security, the perspective of Constructivism in this writing is used to analyze the ideational factor of security, which is perceived and constructed by the units in the region—in other words, the “securitization interdependence” in the regional level.

In Central Asia, the interdependence between units of the region in the process of securitization could be seen from the regional security cooperation fora available in the region, mainly the SCO. Corresponding to the main security concerns in the region; that is to say, the movements of religious extremist groups to reform the authoritarian regime of the states in Central Asia, the ethno-nationalism problem which headed to movements of separatism, also the existence of moral and financial support from terrorist groups to extremist and separatist groups in the region; also China’s fear of separatism efforts shown by the Uighur ethnic group in Xinjiang province, in which by ethnicity and religion is closer to the Central Asian region, SCO formulated these problems with a conception called “*the three evils*”. This “three evils”—the issues of separatism, extremism and terrorism—are seen as a threat to international security which must be tackled and that their development should be prevented<sup>27</sup>, in which its definition, efforts to prevention and handling are stated in details in the “Charter of the SCO” and another separate document called “the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism”. In these two documents, shown are the *speech act* done by the leaders of the member states of the SCO, constructing that the three problems are the main threats to the domestic security of the SCO member states and also the stability of the Central Asian region. Furthermore, the issue of terrorism between Central Asia and Afghanistan, which is intertwined with the issue of drug-trafficking and organized transnational crime networks, was also securitized as part of the regional threats in Central Asia by the SCO through a statement, plan of action and protocol of the establishment of SCO-Afghanistan contact group.<sup>28</sup> From this elaboration, it could be seen that the political sector is the main security agenda of the Central Asian region.

Thus, the paradigm of Constructivism in the Regional Security Complex theory shows the interplay from the patterns of enmity and amity in the process of securitization which are interdependent between the units in Central Asia, also involving Afghanistan,

Russia and China, with SCO as the forum containing the process and interaction. The **securitization interdependence** in Central Asia emerged because of the internalisation of “ally” role based on the same understanding of threat and security, from the pattern of fear of the potentially intensification of threat which might influence the security of the Central Asian states, Russia, China and Afghanistan, in which the process of idea construction was facilitated by a cooperation forum.

### **Research Findings**

If the Regional Security Complex theory from the Realist perspective shows that there was an interdependence of insecurity, where the security issues in the region was considered as intertwined to each other, then in the case of Central Asia, it could be seen that there is a pattern of insecurity driven by the rivalries of the external powers in Central Asia. Thus, there was an **“insecurity interdependence by external force”** in Central Asia, since the pattern of enmity was more prominently found in the constestation of power and influence between Russia, China and the United States, compared to the pattern of enmity from the states within the region itself.

The perspective of Liberalism viewed that security is a common interest which was interdependent in a region. As for Central Asia, interdependence was manifested in form of security cooperations of the Central Asian states, despite the formation of those institutions were initiated by the external powers. This could be seen as a form of **“security interdependence by interest”** in Central Asia, which encompassed the interests of the Central Asian states to overcome their security issues, and also those of the neighboring states and external powers which found that the stability of Central Asian security might influence their own.

As for the perspective of Constructivism, the process of securitization in issues perceived as threat to regional security were explored, facilitated by cooperation fora. The interdependence in the securitization process between the states of Central Asia, and the role of Russia and China in initiating the forum for such process could be seen as a form of **“securitization interdependence by understanding of threat”** in the region of Central Asia.

Having seen the initiatives and interactions in Central Asia started off and maintained mostly by the global powers Russia, China and the United States in the patterns of security relations found in each of the analysis, Central Asia is to be categorized as a Great Power type regional security complex, with Russia and China as the main poles of the region.



From the three perspectives used in this writing, Russia and China has played a major role in the patterns of enmity and amity of the region, as well as directing the security agenda of Central Asia. However, this form of power penetration could not be categorized as a condition of “overlay” since, mostly shown in the Liberalist perspective, it has been the interests of the Central Asian states to secure itself from the threats—thus shows that not all the security interests or security agenda are merely driven by the external powers interacting in the region, but that the interactions found in order to achieve security are based on the similarities of interests and purpose between the two parties.

Regarding the durability of the Central Asia regional security complex, it can be concluded that the region would remain in existence as long as these following conditions are maintained.

1. That the contestation of interests between China, Russia and the United States remain in Central Asia, considering the pattern of enmity which dominated the construction of interdependence in Central Asia came from these external powers,
2. That the interest to stability of Central Asian security is still related to the security interest of China, Russia and the United States, considering the interdependence of security interests initiated by the external powers in form of institutions,
3. That the issues of separatism, religious extremism, terrorism and drug trafficking are still found in the region, considering that these are the security issues that binds the Central Asian states and that the issues are closely linked to each other. This is also related to the perception that the issues are threats to the regional security of Central Asia, be it by the states of Central Asia itself, or by Russia and China perceiving its importance to the regional stability of Central Asia as a whole.

From these conditions, the *status quo* in Central Asia could be maintained. In other words, changes in the three conditions might result in internal transformation to the Central Asian security complex.

In conclusion, the Central Asian region as a security complex could be viewed from the paradigms of Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism, which shows that the region is not immune to contestations and interests of external powers involved in it, and is unique because of the broadening of security issues to the political sector, which the region prioritized. Considering the influence of great powers involved in the region, and the interdependence of their interest with the security issues and interests of the states in the region, the Central

Asian security complex could be categorized as the centered Great-Power complex, as its existence would be maintained as long as the contestations of great powers' interests continue, the interdependence of security conditions of the great powers' in the region remain, and the regional security concerns not yet resolved.

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### **Endnotes**

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<sup>2</sup> Buzan and Waever, *Regions*, 51.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 50. There are several different types of security complex possible to be formed, as categorized by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, mainly seen from the distribution of power within the region, or even external powers surfaced as the regional poles. The main four types of security complexes according to Buzan and Waever are the standard, centred, great power and supercomplexes type. Further elaboration could be found in Buzan and Waever, *Regions*, 62.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Kort, *Nations in Transition: Central Asian Republics* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1994), 73.

<sup>6</sup> Raja Menon and Henri J. Barkey, “The Transformation of Central Asia: Implications for Regional and International Security,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 34, no. 4 (1992): 68-89.

<sup>7</sup> Kort, *Nations*, v.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>9</sup> Rajan Menon, “The New Great Game in Central Asia,” *Survival* 45, no. 2 (2003): 189-191.

<sup>10</sup> Kort, *Nations*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 12; Menon and Barkey, “The Transformation,” 70-71.

<sup>12</sup> Kort, *Nations*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, vi.

<sup>14</sup> Buzan and Waever, *Regions*, 424.

<sup>15</sup> More information regarding the classification of “superpower” and “great power” in the post-Cold War era can be found in Buzan and Waever, *Regions*, 34-37.

<sup>16</sup> Lena Jonson, “Russia and Central Asia”, in *Central Asian Security: The New International Context*, ed. Roy Allison and Lena Jonson (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2001), 102; Philip G. Roeder, “From Hierarchy to Hegemony: The Post Soviet Security Complex,” in *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World*, ed. David Lake and Patrick M. Morgan (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 236; Marlene Laruelle and Sebastien Peyrouse, “The United States in Central Asia: Reassessing a Challenging Partnership,” *Strategic Analysis* 35, no.3 (2011): 427-438.

<sup>17</sup> Menon and Barkey, “The Transformation,” 81.

<sup>18</sup> “Commonwealth of Independent States”, *CISTAT*, accessed 11 June 2012, [www.cistat.com/eng/cis.htm](http://www.cistat.com/eng/cis.htm)

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<sup>22</sup> “Charter of the SCO,” *SECTSCO*, accessed 15 May 2012, <http://www.sectscsco.org/EN/show.asp?id=69>; Alexander Lukin, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: What Next?” *Russia in Global Affairs* 5, no. 3, (2007): 142-148.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Blank, “The United States and Central Asia,” in Allison and Jonson, *Central Asian*, 129.

<sup>24</sup> Ole Waever, “Securitization and Desecuritization,” *On Security*, ed. Ronnie D. Lipschutz (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 48, 54.

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<sup>25</sup> Buzan and Waeber, *Regions*, 86.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> “Charter of the SCO,” SECTSO, accessed 15 May 2012, <http://www.sectso.org/EN/show.asp?id=69>; “The Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism”, *SECTSCO*, accessed 15 Tuesday 2012, <http://sectso.org/EN/show.asp?id=68>

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