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INTRODUCTION

Critical approaches to security in Central Asia: an introduction

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From the days of the Great Game, when the British government was concerned about the threat to India resulting from Russian expansion into Central Asia, to Soviet fears about the emergence of parallel Islam in the region and contemporary concerns about the threat of conflict over water, Central Asia has often been viewed through the prism of security. Central Asia is often portrayed by governments, the media, and in academia and policy circles as a region that is endangered by a host of crises (Heathershaw and Megoran 2011). Building on previous work challenging this 'discourse of danger' in Central Asia, this special issue critically assesses questions of how security is imagined, how it is practised and how it is experienced in the region. Despite adopting different theoretical approaches and examining different cases, all of the authors take a critical approach to the study of security. In doing so, their approach runs counter to assumptions used in many analyses of security in the region.

Inspired by realist approaches, many accounts of security in Central Asia take security to be an objectively measurable phenomenon (Menon 2003; Menon and Spruyt 1999; Rumer 2006; Brzezinski 1997; Oliker and Szayna 2003). As a field of inquiry, 'traditional' security studies are limited to 'the study of the threat, use and control of military force' (Walt 1991, 212). 'Traditional', realist-inspired scholars of security focus on the ways rational, self-interested states, existing in an anarchical system, use military force to pursue their political aims, the most important of which is survival. The state thus constitutes the referent object of security, and warfare constitutes the main threat to the security of the state system (Baldwin 1995). Actors can precisely define security; it exists independently of human interaction rather than being derivative of it. For analysts adopting this approach the goal becomes one of measuring different threat levels, analysing their causes and drawing inferences about the prospects of instability.

In the past three decades, however, this orthodox approach to studying security has faced criticism from scholars associated with what has come to be known as Critical Security Studies.[1]

Scholars have critiqued 'traditional' approaches for their rationalism, ontological essentialism and epistemological positivism. Critical approaches to security have challenged traditional conceptualizations of the nature and type of security threats, the narrow definition of security centred on survival, and the referent object that security measures seek to protect: the state. By taking security to be a self-evident category of analysis, scholars have paid insufficient attention to the ways that actors themselves understand security and how those in power manipulate the concept of security to pursue their goals. Instead of having a fixed meaning, security is a slippery, essentially contested concept,

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defined and experienced in varying ways by different actors (Zedner 2009; Valverde 2011; Huysmans 1998). Scholars have called for a *widening* of security studies to include a greater array of threats, such as environmental degradation and migration, and a *deepening* of security to incorporate a broader spectrum of actors operating at different levels in the international system, including sub-state groups and supra-state organizations (Krause and Williams 1997).

Adopting this critical approach, contributing authors have examined how certain issues have become objects of security, how actors attempt to manage these threats and how the politics of security shapes people's lives. In other words, the authors engage theoretically and empirically with *security discourses*, *security practices* and *everyday security*.

Security discourses

Inspired by post-structuralist and constructivist thinking, critical scholars argue that, rather than existing independently of social relations, security threats are inter-subjectively constituted within discourses (Ashley 1984; Ashley and Walker 1990; Shapiro and Der Derian 1989; Krause and Williams 1997; Wæver et al. 1993; Campbell 1998; Weldes et al. 1999; C.A.S.E Collective 2006). Securitization studies, also known as the Copenhagen School, has been perhaps the most influential approach to studying security discourses and is referenced by a number of articles in this special issue. Rather than taking the meaning of security as a given, securitization places emphasis on the process by which actors label a phenomenon a security threat. In the words of Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Japp de Wilde in their seminal work *Security: A New Framework of Analysis* (1998, 24), 'Security is thus a self-referential practice because it is in this practice that the issue becomes a security issue- not necessarily because a real existential threat exists.' This process is neither objective nor subjective, but inter-subjective. Securitization is only possible when an actor frames an issue as an existential threat and the audience accepts it as such. For example, during the 1980s government agencies in Europe increasingly represented migration as a potential threat to security, emphasizing its potential to destabilize public order and erode national culture (Huysmans 2000). Migration control is imbricated in the language of security; migration has become securitized.

By labelling something a threat, it is lifted out of the sphere of criminality or politics and into the sphere of security, enabling extraordinary measures against its perpetrators. Securitization involves framing issues 'as a special kind of politics or as above politics' (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 23). But beyond acknowledging that actors take actions to address security threats after they have labelled them as such, the 'first' generation of securitization scholars did not elaborate further on how security is managed and with what effects. Indeed, a 'second' generation of securitization theorists has criticized earlier versions of the theory for neglecting the importance of the social context in which the speech act takes place, for failing to analyse the role of the audience in accepting or rejecting the securitization move, for paying insufficient attention to what takes place after securitization, and for failing to appreciate the co-constitutive relationship between the speech act and the speaker's power (Bigo 2002; Balzacq 2005; Stritzel 2011; Meyer 2009; Erikkson 1999). As a number of the authors in this special issue highlight, the ability of the elite to label something a security threat constitutes a 'political technology in the hegemonic project of various agents' (Jackson 2007, 421). As Natalie Koch

(this volume) convincingly argues, elites use fear and danger to fix the boundaries of national identity and position themselves as protectors of the political community.

Scholars working on security in Central Asia have not been immune to these developments. In 2005, a special issue of *Central Asian Survey* examined 'discourses of danger' in Central Asia, examining the way various governmental and non-governmental actors framed danger stemming from conflict over resources to the risks associated with the presence of small arms, and how the way this was framed legitimated certain interventions (Heathershaw and Thompson 2005). Authors have also examined how actors have framed violent incidents (Shaykhutdinov, this volume; Megoran 2008; Lewis 2016; Lemon 2014), developed amorphous definitions of extremism and terrorism (Bashirov, this volume; Horsman 2005; Chernykh and Burnashev 2005), and securitized issues ranging from Islam (McBrien 2006; Rasanayagam 2006; Lemon and Thibault, this volume; Bashirov this volume; Khalid 2007) to protests (Koch, this volume; Wilkinson 2007) and drug trafficking (De Danieli 2011). While these studies have paid close attention to how actors frame security issues in the region, many also place these discourses within the broader social and political context of the region. In other words, they also examine security practices.

Security practices

We should not think about security as a 'thing, a concept or a condition but rather as an umbrella term under which one can see a multiplicity of governance processes' (Valverde 2011, 5). Studying discourses of security in isolation only provides insights into how objects, or subjects, come to be constructed as threats, neglecting what happens afterwards. More recently, scholars working in critical approaches to security have engaged with the broader 'practice turn' in the social sciences (Schatzki 2001). Emmanuael Adler and Vincent Pouilot (2011, 4), who have applied a practice-centred approach to global politics, define practices as 'socially meaningful patterns of action, which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world'. Discourse and practice, then, are inextricably linked; 'practice cannot be thought "outside of" discourse', and vice versa (Neumann 2002, 628). Security practices range from passport checks, to urban planning, to constructing cities that will be 'resilient' to terrorist attacks, to using force against enemy combatants. Scholars associated with the Paris School of security studies have led the way in theorizing security practices (Bigo 1996; Bigo and Walker 2007; Guzzini 2000; Huysmans 2006).

The language of security is used to 'exclude in the name of protection and … discriminate within society' (Bigo 2008, 105). Security professionals attempt to categorize risks, profile groups and evaluate dangers. In doing so, they divide the normal from the abnormal, the ordinary from the exceptional. Be they labelled a 'patriot', a 'terrorist' or a 'radical', individuals are 'made up' by the social categories that experts and administrators invent to label and organize them (Rose and Miller 1992, 174). This assignment of subjective positions is a process of becoming, not being. People are not born as 'terrorists' or 'Islamic extremists'; they become them through processes of labelling and practice that are undercut by relations of power. A number of post-structuralist scholars have examined the ways in which security discourses and practices configure the boundaries of subjectivity (Walker

1997; Dillon 1990; Agathangelou and Ling 2005; Epstein 2011; Shepherd 2007). In this special issue, for example, Edward Lemon and Hélène Thibault argue that counter-extremism in Tajikistan is not just about governing danger, it is also about promoting certain forms of behaviour. While attention to the practices of those governing security can help uncover the logic underlying these processes, such an approach has less to say about their effects on those they target, both those deemed threatening and those in need of securing. Ken Booth (2007, 152) writes that the study of security 'should begin in the experiences, imaginings, analyses and fears of those living with insecurity'.

Everyday security

At its most basic level security involves 'being and feeling safe from harm and danger' (Fierke 2015, 7). It is therefore inherently subjective, based on an individual's lived experiences, feelings and emotions. To move beyond the elitist bias that characterizes much of the literature focusing on security, we need to pay more to the ways security shapes everyday life. As Adam Crawford and Steven Hutchinson (2015, 5) argue, 'The "everyday" acts as an important counter to a prevailing emphasis upon the "spectacular" and the "exceptional", which cast a long shadow over security research.'

Sociologists and anthropologists have long been concerned with lived experiences of survival, uncertainty and violence (Goldstein 2010; Pedersen and Holbraad 2013, 4). Anthony Giddens (1991) coined the term 'ontological security' to refer to security derived from the certainty, order and continuity in people's daily lives. Ulrich Beck (1992) examined the development during modernity of a 'risk society' that is increasingly focused on measuring and mitigating future hazards. Scholars working in security studies have only recently started to pay closer attention to the everyday (Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2017). Indeed, Nick Vaughan-Williams and Daniel Stevens identify separate 'vernacular' and 'everyday' turns in security studies in recent years.

Scholars focusing on the 'vernacular' have examined public opinion and threat perception with the view to giving voice to the voiceless (Bubandt 2005; Gillespie and O'Loughlin 2009; Jarvis and Lister 2013). Such literature examines how particular individuals and groups articulate their attitudes and understandings of (in)security. Crawford and Hutchinson (2015, 2) suggest the term 'security experiences' to denote 'the lived realities of practical security measures, including the diverse ways in which programmes, strategies and techniques for governing security are experienced, taken up, resisted, and even augmented by different individuals and groups within society'. Drawing on Arjun Appadurai's work on cultural flows during globalization, in their article in this special issue, Marc von Boemcken, Hafiz Boboyorov and Nina Bagdasarova use the term 'securityscapes' to refer to 'everyday practices that become constituted by imaginations of existential danger'.

Academics associated with the 'everyday' turn identified by Vaughan-Williams and Stevens are mostly associated with the Paris School, but, drawing on French cultural theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Karl Barthes and Michel de Certeau, they have moved beyond the elite bias that characterizes much of the work associated with this approach (Guillaume and Huysmans 2013; Huysmans 2014; Noxolo and Huysmans 2009). They have challenged the way those interested in the 'vernacular' have created a dichotomy between the high politics of elites and the low politics of subalterns (Huysmans 2014). The everyday,

as argued above, is ambiguous; it brings together the insecuritizing moves of elites with the practices of everyday life. Rather than focusing on perceptions alone, they have examined the everyday practices of security and how these shape citizen subjects. Ethnographies of the everyday practices of security have found them to be 'far less rational and much more "messy" than expected' (Aas, Gundhaus, and Lomell 2009, 8).

Although many of them would not see themselves as working on security per se, a number of anthropologists working on Central Asia have explored the lived experiences of (in)security in the region. Aksana Ismailbekova (2013) has examined the day-to-day 'coping strategies' of ethnic Uzbeks in Osh following the 2010 violence. A number of scholars have examined 'everyday' concepts of peace (Taj.: *tinj*, Uzb.: *tinchlik, Kyr.*: *tynchtyk*) and how these relate to patriarchal governmental discourses which position the government as protector of this 'harmony' (*yntymak*) (Cramer, this volume; Heathershaw 2007; Liu 2012; Mostowlansky 2013). In her work on the Ferghana Valley, Madeleine Reeves (2014) has examined how communities produce and police national borders in their absence. In Uzbekistan, Johan Rasanayagam (2006: 115) has examined how community members used the label 'Wahhabi' 'to direct the attention of law enforcement bodies to any religious activities that are unfamiliar'. Building on this work and drawing on insights from the theoretical literature on security, many of the authors in this special issue examine how Central Asians experience danger and security (Cramer; Lemon and Thibault; Bekmurzaev, Lottholz and Meyer; Ding; von Boemcken, Boboyorov and Bagdasarova). The articles in this special issue fit with Heathershaw and Megoran's (2011, 18) idea that 'the aim of any counter-narrative to the discourse of danger must be to reveal some of the diverse experiences of danger as felt by individuals, families and communities'.

Overview of the articles

The eight articles in this special issue cover a range of areas within the scope of *Central Asian Survey*, including Xinjiang, Azerbaijan, the Middle Volga and Urals, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Reflecting the diversity of the authors, the collection is interdisciplinary, drawing on insights from anthropology, sociology, political science, geography and philosophy. This plurality is also reflected in the methods the authors adopt, including discourse analysis (Shaykhutdinov; Bashirov; Koch), auto-ethnography (Bekmurzaev, Lottholz and Meyer), interviews (Cramer) and ethnography (von Boemcken, Boboyorov and Bagdasarova; Ding; Lemon and Thibault). Topics covered by the articles in this issue include Islamic extremism (Shaykhutdinov; Lemon and Thibault; Bashirov), communities marginalized by the state (von Boemcken, Boboyorov and Bagdasarova; Cramer; Ding), the process of conducting research on security (Bekmurzaev, Lottholz and Meyer), and the geopolitics of danger in Central Asia (Koch). The articles explore how actors frame security issues, how security is practised in the region, and the everyday experiences of (in)security by Central Asians.

Drawing on insights from critical geopolitics, Natalie Koch's contribution examines the spatial dynamics of fear and instability in state discourses in Central Asia. Specifically, Koch explores how leaders in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan justified authoritarian forms of governance as the guarantor of security and stability by framing the 2005 Tulip Revolution, the 2010 revolution and subsequent ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan as exemplifying the dangers of an excessively liberal system. Contrary to its reputation among outside

observers as the region's best hope for democratization and its own cultivation of an image as the region's 'island of democracy', other states in the region present Kyrgyzstan as a dangerous place, where weak governance has caused instability. Where Uzbekistan's government blamed these events on the 'unnamed third forces', Kazakhstan's regime argued that weak economic development was the main cause. Framing events in such a way was not just aimed at creating the idea of a dangerous Other; state discourses also cultivate an image of the Self. Through these narratives each government justified its own authoritarian development model, placing emphasis on economic development and a strong state as the means to preserve order.

Galib Bashirov's contribution also explores hegemonic security discourses. His article examines the government of Azerbaijan's securitization of 'non-traditional religious movements' such as the Salafi and Nurcu movements. Using discourse analysis and a post-structuralist approach to securitization, Bashirov highlights how in the 1990s the government framed state-controlled Azerbaijani Islam as tolerant, moderate, apolitical and secular, and foreign Islam as divisive, radical, political and fundamentalist. This hegemonic narrative did not go unchallenged. Bashirov highlights how some groups labelled as extremists used the language of secular democracy and human rights to challenge the government's claim to be the defender of these values. Faced with this resistance, the regime started using the term 'non-traditional religious movements' in the late 2000s to refer to the vast array of groups beyond government control, framing them as a dangerous foreign Other linked to chaos beyond the border in ways that reflect Koch's observations in Central Asia. By framing them as a national security threat, the government reinforced the discursive boundaries of national identity and legitimized emergency measures to curtail their activities, such as restricting registration and banning foreign-educated mullahs from leading prayers in mosques.

While Shaykhutdinov's article also uses discourse analysis, he focuses not only on how security is represented by elites, but also on how citizens respond to this. Shaykhutdinov uses the comments section on Radio Free Europe's Tatar-language service (Azatlıq Radiosı) to map the ways local people responded to a series of attacks in 2012 in the Middle Volga and Urals. The attacks in a region of Russia that had been upheld as a model of inter-religious and inter-ethnic concord led to a series of alarmist statements from the Russian- and English-language media, officials and academics. Drawing on the literature on everyday security discussed above, Shaykhutdinov explores the 'vernacular' understandings of these events. Where a small number support the hegemonic narrative, most responses range from ambivalence to questioning the details of the government's account and criticizing the state for targeting Muslims with reprisals. Instead of blaming the terrorists or outside groups for the incident, many respondents argued that state secular policies and marginalization of the Tatar community led to the attacks.

In their article 'Living Dangerously: Securityscapes of Lyuli and LGBT People in Urban Spaces of Kyrgyzstan', Marc von Boemcken, Hafiz Boboyorov and Nina Bagdasarova move beyond the focus on the exceptional politics of security found in much of the security studies literature. Based on ethnographic research with two groups who have been deemed a threat to 'pure' Kyrgyz identity, the Lyuli, or gypsy, community of Jani Kishtak in Osh and Bishkek's LGBTI community, the article explores how strategies to manage concerns over personal safety and existential danger, captured in the term 'securityscape', become 'deeply entrenched in patterns of fairly standardized day-to-day practices'. Both

groups rely on a mixture of social mimicry and boundary drawing to secure themselves against outsiders, adopting an array of strategies that would not usually be considered in the domain of security. Examples of mimicry include Lyuli speaking Kyrgyz in public and using Kyrgyz versions of their names, and members of the LGBTI community adapting their clothing, changing their walking styles and going to the gym to make themselves more 'masculine'. Boundary drawing involves Lyuli actively asserting their identity, distancing themselves from Uzbeks, maintaining strict boundaries with the outside world through intra-community marriage practices, and using styles of dress and carrying babies as a shield against unwanted attention when collecting alms.

Continuing the theme of how those targeted by security measures cope with and negotiate the security environment, in her contribution Mei Ding examines the relationship between security and marriage in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Based on fieldwork in Ürümchi and Kashgar in 2016 and 2017, Ding explores the ways that marriage has become a way for members of the Uyghur community to gain personal happiness (*bext*) and achieve security (*bixeterlik*) by maintaining the boundaries of their community through intra-marriage in a way similar to the Lyuli example discussed by Von Boemcken, Boboyov and Bagdasarova. But the need to find an appropriate husband with the right social status, religious beliefs, family background, regional identity and language complicates women's ability to find security through marriage. Furthermore, relatively low levels of intermarriage exist between the *minkaohan* (Mandarian-speaking Uyghurs) and *minkaomin* (Uyghur-speakers). For many *minkaohan,* who generally have closer relationships with state institutions, marriage can be a way to achieve security through forming ties to the state. But for *minkaomin,* who have been subject to additional security measures since the 2009 Ürümchi riots, a rumour about the scarcity of marriageable men has further contributed to women's sense of insecurity. Ding's rich ethnographic study highlights how marriage can be both a strategy to gain security and, in its absence, a source of insecurity.

In their article, Nurbek Bekmurzaev, Philipp Lottholz and Joshua Meyer explore researcher and research participant experiences of safety and security in Kyrgyzstan. As other countries in Central Asia have become closed to researchers, Kyrgyzstan, with its more 'open' political system, has become a popular destination for researchers working in the region. Reflecting on their own experiences in fieldwork investigating Kyrgyz language use, religious leaders and police reform, the authors argue that research in Kyrgyzstan still raises questions of safety even for those investigating seemingly harmless topics. The authors highlight how the lack of clarity from government organs over what kind of research is allowed provides an opportunity for security services and police to interfere in research they deem threatening. This leaves researchers uncertain as to the legal status and safety implications of their work. To mitigate these risks, the authors highlight the importance of gaining access to and the trust of research participants through key gatekeepers in their networks, establishing some degree of cooperation with government agencies or local organizations, and adopting a flexible, audience-specific approach to framing the research. The authors call for researchers to produce research that not only challenges dominant assumptions about danger in the region but that also adopts a collaborative approach with local partners to address inequalities in the production of knowledge about the region.

Bert Cramer's article also examines a community that has been securitized in both state and popular discourses: those living in Bishkek's *novostroiki* (Russian: 'new buildings'),

informal settlements mostly populated by rural migrants to the city. For the government, such illegal settlements run counter to the ideals of urban modernity; they are spaces of unbridled disorder that exist beyond state control. But Cramer argues that these securitized spaces are not as disorderly as the government frames them. Life in the *novostroiki* is organized around *yntymak,* a set of collective community practices often translated as 'mutual aid' or 'harmony'. For Cramer, *yntymak* is a way communities can build cohesion through social obligations and live harmoniously, forming an alternative means of regulation to the laws, public goods and obligations promoted, but not provided, by the state. Through *yntymak*, communities think for themselves and actively resist forms of state control. State securitization of the *novostroiki* has not only failed to bring them back within the state-led order, it has contributed to the strengthening of an alternative politics based on *yntymak*.

Finally, in their study of counter-extremism in Tajikistan, Edward Lemon and Hélène Thibault analyse all three aspects of security I have highlighted in this introduction. Similar to Bashirov's observations in Azerbaijan, they examine how the government has created a discursive dichotomy between 'good', state-controlled Islam and 'bad', unofficial, dangerous Islam. This securitization legitimizes repressive security measures against those deemed 'extremists', but it also involves the promotion of secular lifestyles and an anti-political culture. Through ethnographic fieldwork, Lemon and Thibault map the ways those targeted for 'extremism' have negotiated and contested being securitized. Such responses, as the other articles examining the everyday politics of security have also observed, range from openly rejecting their label and accusing the government of 'secular extremism' to finding certainty and security in religion.

A number of themes arise from the collection. First, while work on how outsiders frame the region as dangerous, bizarre and obscure has been useful in challenging pervasive dominant assumptions about the region, the special issue shifts attention to emic perspectives on what security is and who it is for. Second, as many critical approaches to security developed in Western academic institutions and drew on empirical evidence from Europe and North America, a number of academics have questioned how well this approach 'travels' to non-Western settings (Acharya and Buzan 2007; Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Vasilaki 2012). Using examples from Kyrgyzstan, Cai Wilkinson (2007), for example, illustrates how the Copenhagen School's focus on state actors and speech acts makes it unsuitable for universal application, as it cannot be adapted to local socio-political contexts. Authors in this special issue argue that critical approaches can be applied, sometimes with amendments, to non-Western settings. Third, many of the contributions explore the links between security and power. They examine how security predicates the exclusion of those deemed threatening and helps define the boundary between Self and Other. Appeals to security and exceptional measures taken in its name form a powerful legitimator for authoritarian rule in Central Asia. Lastly, six of the eight articles draw on the everyday experiences of groups who have been deemed threatening by state and non-state actors, including LGBTI, those labelled religious 'extremists', and those dwelling in *novostroiki*. As the contributions to this special issue indicate, the story of security in Central Asia is less about 'hotbeds of extremism', putative water wars and pipeline politics, and more about citizens' everyday struggles in dealing with repressive and corrupt state institutions, societal intolerance, and suspicion of those framed as outsiders by hegemonic discourses. But the authors also point to the ways citizens cope with and resist the oppressive politics

of security. From finding strength in Islam or marrying strategically to practising *yntymak* or adapting their dress to conform to societal norms, people in Central Asia find ways to continue living in spite of insecurity.

Note

1. As Ole Wæver (2004) has argued, the division between 'traditional' and 'critical' obscures the large amount of internal variation within each approach.

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