



Tajik soldiers at a base near Dushanbe Credit: Eurasian Dialogue

## Responding to Crises in Central Asia: Can Academic Literature Inform the Response of Outsiders? by Christian Bleuer

*Academics could play a crucial role in policy making in Central Asia, but at present this is not the case. Tajikistan-based academic Christian Bleuer examines why.*

Outside actors draw on various sources to inform their policies when responding to crises and on-going problems in Central Asia. These actors, in the form of interested states (e.g., Russia and the United States), international organisations (UN, OSCE, etc.), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and security alliances (e.g., the Collective Security Treaty Organisation), all have their own systems of collecting information. This includes spying, accessing open source information (e.g., newspapers), consulting local embassy staff or local government representatives, drawing on the experience of regionally-based NGO and international organisation employees, paying for access to expertise from political risk consulting firms, etc... But should academic literature on Central Asia be included on this list?

Analysts in the intelligence community and, to a lesser extent, within political risk consulting do read the academic literature on Central Asia. However, this is just one source they use within a flood of information that they must analyse. And, furthermore, the nature of scholarly research means that most of the analysis is not directly relevant to whatever crisis may be occurring at the moment and, to the perspective of some, the analysis seems out of date. Academics, of course, generally do not

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produce scholarly publications based on breaking news. But their publications do help to form a base of knowledge about local society and politics that an analyst can build upon.

But even if scholarly publications can assist in this manner, there are additional problems. The first obvious barrier is the subscription pay-wall. An internet search may point to academic publications, but most people do not have subscription access to these journals. As an example, I am currently researching the Afghanistan factor in Central Asia. A Google search today recently pointed me towards a scholarly journal article on the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in helping Central Asian governments manage the problem of Afghanistan. However, I have recently, due to graduating, lost my university subscription access to a wide range of academic journals. I was about to send a request to a friend still in university to download a copy of the article, but then I checked the footnotes and citations. Despite the article being published in 2013, the most recent references were from sources dated in 2011. Unfortunately, this time lag is typical of many academic journals.

Those in the scholarly community must put their work in places where the public can easily access it. It would be ill-advised to put all or even most of one's publications in open-access (“free for all to download”) publications, as their universities would punish them for doing so (by denying tenure due to lack of publications in highly ranked journals, for example). But there is no excuse for not having at least a few reports or long-format articles available for all to read. Even briefer articles can be quite enlightening, and the outlets for these types of articles are quite numerous (blogs, online magazines, think tank websites, etc.).

These are the forums where academics and scholars could engage with policy debates and actually be heard by the broader public, as opposed to academic publications, conferences and university forums where academics speak to each other rather than to the public. Moving away from a discussion of the timeliness and accessibility of scholarly journal publications, books published through the academic press are often not available in book stores, and via online book vendors they are usually expensive and do not have a good sales rank.

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Furthermore, even if these publications could be accessed, many of them are difficult to understand as they are produced for consumption by people who understand the academic jargon and dense discussions of theory. Not all publications can be stereotyped in this manner, but the use of inaccessible writing styles is often cited as a barrier between academia and the rest of the world.

Even if all of the above problems are overcome, there is the problem of the scope of scholarly literature. For many areas and issues within Central Asia there is a paucity of literature. For example, during the Osh conflict of 2010 one could, with some difficulty, access publications on the ethnic conflict that occurred there in 1990 and the problems faced in the intervening years. But, for the recent conflict in eastern Tajikistan in summer 2012 there was comparatively very little available. There are academic articles on eastern Tajikistan, but none of them are directly related to the socio-political factors most relevant to the military conflict. And, occasionally, scholars can be on the wrong side of predictions. Many in the academic community had assumed that there would be turmoil when Turkmenistan’s authoritarian ruler died. However, his death in late 2006 was followed by an orderly transition to another authoritarian ruler.

A final problem is one that cannot be overcome. Even if the relevant outside actors had near-perfect knowledge of the social, political and military factors behind any crisis, this does not mean that the crisis at hand can be overcome. Take, for example, the Israel-Palestinian conflict. The amount of scholarly publications on this problem is truly immense, yet the conflict endures. Having a strong knowledge of all the factors involved in a conflict does not translate into the conflicting parties and interested outside actors being able to come to an agreement.

Nevertheless, despite all of the pessimistic commentary above, there is still a role for the scholarly literature in informing policy-makers. A good reading of the available publications can greatly inform one’s understanding of the region’s politics and the dynamics within local communities. Have a solid base of understanding of Central Asia enables a person (or an organisation) to better understand crises as they emerge or worsen. Take the example of eastern Tajikistan above. If a person had previously familiarised themselves with the last twenty years of Tajikistan’s history they would be well prepared to quickly and accurately analyse the conflict (in comparison to the analysis that was coming out at the time), even if they did not specialise in eastern Tajikistan in particular.

Being informed by this sort of analysis could assist helping states, NGOs and organisations in avoiding mistakes if and when they choose to deepen their involvement in Central Asia in response to crisis situations. It is clear from statements by representatives of foreign states and by many journalists that there are massive gaps and shortcomings in understanding what is happening in Central Asia. Despite all the shortcomings with what and how scholarly researchers publish on Central Asia, their work can be used to help prepare an individual or organisation for analysing crises as they occur.

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