

Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

# Post-Soviet Regional Security Complex Revisited: Is Central Asia Still A Subcomplex?\*

Ömer Faruk Kocatepe\*\*  
Mehmet Şahin\*\*\*

## Abstract

In this study, Central Asia is addressed within the framework of the Regional Security Complex Theory. In the Regional Security Complex theory developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, Central Asia is defined as a sub-complex that constitutes the Post-Soviet Regional Security Complex but claims that it can become a separate complex under certain conditions. Twenty years after their pioneering study, the continuities and changes in the region have necessitated an analysis of where the authors' claim stands. Therefore, in this study, the areas that need to be revised in the original work and the transformations have been evaluated. The study emphasizes the importance of political security in the region's transformation into a separate complex, but attempts to demonstrate that it cannot yet be considered a separate complex.

## Keywords

Regional Security Complex Theory, Central Asia, political security, regional cooperation, securitization.

\* Date of Arrival: 18 June 2023 – Date of Acceptance: 02 February 2024

You can refer to this article as follows:

Kocatepe, Ömer Faruk, and Mehmet Şahin. "Post-Soviet Regional Security Complex Revisited: Is Central Asia Still A Subcomplex?" *bilig*, no. 110, 2024, pp. 135-156, <https://doi.org/10.12995/bilig.11006>.

\*\* Dr., National Defence University of Türkiye, Center for NCO Headquarters Services Education, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences – Ankara/Türkiye  
ORCID: 0000-0001-8647-4634  
omerfarukkocatepe@hotmail.com

\*\*\* Assoc. Prof. Dr., National Defence University of Türkiye, Military Academy, Department of International Relations – Ankara/Türkiye  
ORCID: 0000-0002-0142-6666  
mesahin@kho.msu.edu.tr

# Post-Sovyet Bölgesel Güvenlik Kompleksini Yeniden Ele Almak: Orta Asya Hâlâ Bir Alt Kompleks mi?\*

Ömer Faruk Kocatepe\*\*

Mehmet Şahin\*\*\*

## Öz

Bu çalışmada, Bölgesel Güvenlik Kompleksi Teorisi kapsamında Orta Asya ele alınmıştır. Barry Buzan ve Ole Wæver tarafından geliştirilen Bölgesel Güvenlik Kompleksi teorisinde, Orta Asya, Post-Sovyet Bölgesel Kompleksini oluşturan bir alt kompleks olarak tanımlanmakla birlikte belli şartlar gerçekleştiğinde ayrı bir komplekse dönüşebileceğini iddia etmiştir. 20 yılın ardından bölgedeki devam ve değişimler yazarların bu iddiasında nereye geldiğini analiz etme ihtiyacını doğurmuştur. Bu bakımdan bu çalışmada, orijinal çalışmanın revize edilmesi gereken yerleri ve dönüşümler değerlendirilmiştir. Çalışma, bölgenin ayrı bir komplekse dönüşmesinde siyasi güvenliğin önemini vurgulamakta ancak henüz ayrı bir kompleks olarak değerlendirilemeyeceği gösterilmeye çalışılmıştır.

## Anahtar Kelimeler

Bölgesel Güvenlik Kompleksi Teorisi, Orta Asya, siyasi güvenlik, bölgesel iş birliği, güvenikleştirme.

\* Geliş Tarihi: 18 Haziran 2023 – Kabul Tarihi: 02 Şubat 2024

Bu makaleyi şu şekilde kaynak gösterebilirsiniz:

Kocatepe, Ömer Faruk, ve Mehmet Şahin. "Post-Soviet Regional Security Complex Revisited: Is Central Asia Still A Subcomplex?" *bilig*, no. 110, 2024, ss. 135-156, <https://doi.org/10.12995/bilig.11006>.

\*\* Dr., Milli Savunma Üniversitesi, Astsubay Üst Karargâh Hizmetleri Eğitim Merkezi, Beşeri ve Sosyal Bilimler Bölümü – Ankara/Türkiye

ORCID: 0000-0001-8647-4634

omerfarukkocatepe@hotmail.com

\*\*\* Doç. Dr., Milli Savunma Üniversitesi, Kara Harp Okulu Dekanlığı, Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü – Ankara/Türkiye

ORCID: 0000-0002-0142-6666

mesahin@kho.msu.edu.tr

## Introduction

There are two competing ideas on the transition of the international system after the Cold War. According to one view, the notion of the USA assuming a unipolar leadership role emerged with the collapse of the Soviet Union (Wohlforth; Yalçın and İlhan), while another view argues that the international system has evolved into a multipolar order (Acharya; Efeğil and Musaoğlu). The main premise of the unipolar view is the idea that the USA has become the sole dominant power in the world as the winner of the Cold War. On the other hand, the decline of US hegemony, the rise of China, and the resurgence of Russia have brought to light the idea of multipolarity, especially after the mid-2000s. Therefore, it can be argued that the main reasons for the emergence of different opinions in the literature lie in the ongoing differentiation of power balances among regions. As a matter of fact, although the definition of the 21st century has changed over time in international level, competition and power relations persist at the regional level. For instance, although the USA is the world's largest military and economic power, its influence in Central Asia is limited. In contrast, China has become the dominant state in Asia, even without attaining global power status.

With the end of the Cold War, change in the balance of power was not the only significant transformation. Security understandings and approaches in the changing international landscape also entered a new era. With the emergence of the New World Order, less emphasis was placed on military power, whereas more attention was given to economic and political power in addressing the security problems between states. During this period, policymakers, strategists, and academics started to develop new theoretical approaches to this new phase. Specifically, proponents of Social Constructivism and the Copenhagen School argued that realism has become insufficient in explaining the international environment, as it adopted either a systemic-level or state-level analytical perspective. Instead, they posited the need for an intermediate level to comprehend the post-Cold War era, which encompasses both interregional and intra-regional conflicts within the security domain. Accordingly, it has been argued that the international relations literature, which has predominantly focused on state and system-level analysis since the 1960s, has proven inadequate in this new era. As a

result of this, the idea of a “security complex” (Buzan) was first put forward as an alternative approach by Buzan in the 1980s. The idea was further developed by him and Ole Wæver and formulated as “Regional Security Complex Theory” in the following years.

Regional Security Complex Theory gained weight in the post-Cold War period and emerged clearly in the book “Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security” written by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver in 2003 (Buzan and Wæver). Due to the changes in the international system experienced in this period, the diversification of security perceptions after the Cold War, and thus the insufficient levels of analysis, regional divergences became more evident. In this respect, the Regional Security Complex Theory aimed to explain the complex situation in the post-Soviet geography and the Central Asia<sup>1</sup>, as in many parts of the world.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, which changed the international system, directly affected the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia and created a power vacuum. The transition to the nation-state model and the integration process of the five Central Asian countries, which gained independence from the Soviets, encountered several problems. Despite explorations of alternative approaches both within and outside the region to manage the integration into the global system, the desired outcomes were not achieved. This was mainly due to a range of problems and conflicts within the region, such as nation-building, economic dependency, radicalization, political stability, and border disputes. More importantly, the aforementioned power vacuum has attracted the attention of non-regional actors, including the USA and China. Therefore, these republics faced a new set of security problems in order to protect their national security and ensure their continuity (Birdiqli 124). Nevertheless, they also faced the risk of failing to maintain order because of their limited resources to become a functioning state such as lack of sufficient capacity, the absence of military units to ensure their security, internal political challenges, and territorial disputes.

The policies implemented during the Soviet period lay based on the aforementioned problems. Particularly, the demography policies of the Soviet Union aimed to live nations as a single intertwined people instead of separate nations. This policy is the expression of the Soviets’ assimilation policy towards the region. In addition, the policies implemented during

the Stalin era to increase the Slavic population in the region and to change the demographics in favor of the Soviets constitute the basis of some contemporary problems. Likewise, the border problems, which were implemented in this period and separated by sharp and intricate lines after the USSR, constitute another dimension of the structural disorder of the region.

In this regard, this study aims to examine the changing security perceptions of the Central Asia through the Regional Security Complex Theory of Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. In their original work in 2003, Buzan and Wæver linked whether Central Asia should be considered a regional security complex or a subcomplex in the post-Soviet geography to certain conditions that may change over time (Buzan and Wæver 428). They claimed that if Russia weakens, no other foreign power intervenes, and they pose more threats to each other, then it will transform into a separate regional security complex. Alternatively, the US stood by the possibility of its continued presence in the bases in the region and the decline of Russian hegemony, in which case it would be expected to turn into a different regional security complex (Buzan and Wæver 429). The transformation of the region into a new great game between the USA and Russia would also lead to its separation from the post-Soviet regional complex. However, they wrote that this situation was out of possibility because it did not happen according to them.

In this study, the processes that are effective in the transformation of Central Asia into a separate regional security complex or not in the 20-year period will be discussed. It is worth examining the changing dynamics of Central Asia because the authors put forth that the internal dynamics of this subcomplex were still forming in 2003 (Buzan and Wæver 423). Yet, there are surprisingly few studies in the literature on this topic. Kaya (68) and Troitskiy (9) claimed that Central Asia formed a separate security complex owing to external influences, while Akkaya (183) concluded that it still continues as a post-Soviet subcomplex. Unlike the aforementioned studies, Central Asia's struggle to transform into a Sino-centered regional complex instead of Russia (Zengin and Topsakal) also takes place in the literature.

This study will focus on which transformations affect this subcomplex in the time passed from the original work of Buzan and Wæver, and new possible projections will be put forward. The forthcoming paper will

demonstrate the transformation of securitization processes, the evolution of enmity and amity patterns, and the interactions within the Central Asian Subcomplex, particularly following the Color Revolutions. It will be argued that the Central Asian Regional Security Subcomplex diverges from other subcomplexes within the post-Soviet region by delineating a distinct security sphere molded by the securitization of the political sector. Additionally, the shortcomings of the original study of Buzan and Wæver and changing patterns of the post-Soviet space will be addressed. The first two sections will survey the Regional Security Complex Theory and Central Asia from the seminal book of Buzan and Wæver. The third section will elaborate on the shortcomings and changing dynamics of the original work since 2003, specifically focusing on the interactions presented within the framework of the four-level analysis. Finally, the place of the Central Asian Complex and future projections will be demonstrated. The main contribution to Central Asian studies is that, unlike conventional wisdom, it highlights cooperation in border disputes and common securitization processes in the political sector.

### **The regional security complex theory**

The Regional Security Complex Theory is significant for understanding the international system that began to emerge in the last period of the Cold War and changed with the end of the bipolar structure. The issue of regional security became significant with the emergence of new states in the international system owing to the decolonization process in Africa in the 1960s and its significance further increased after the Cold War (Kaya 57). As mentioned above, the concept of the Regional Security Complex was first introduced by Barry Buzan in his book “People, State, and Fear” published in 1983. He defined the security complex as “a group of states whose primary security concerns link together so closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another” (Buzan 106). Barry Buzan later incorporated the Regional Security Complex along with the “securitization” concept, the other pillar of the Copenhagen School, in his book “Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security”, which he co-authored with Ole Wæver in 2003. In this book, they defined it as “a set of units whose major processes of securitisation, desecuritisation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be

analysed or resolved apart from one another” (Buzan and Wæver 44). In this respect, states with a high level of interaction, form a security complex, while the interaction of those outside the complex is relatively low (Güngör 161).

According to Buzan, all states in the international system are interdependent with each other in regards to security. However, due to the fact that threats and insecurities are more related to proximity, the degree of dependence of states close to each other cannot be the same as states far from each other. In this respect, the regional security complex is based on variables, such as intense conflict-cooperation dynamics in which two or more states are mutually affected, geographical and historical proximity, and geopolitical rivalry relations. In other words, it refers to a structure in which elements located in regions with geographically similar characteristics create conflict and cooperation in the context of common security issues. In this respect, Regional Security Complexes are determined by power relations and patterns of amity and enmity (Buzan and Wæver 49). While power relations indicate the balance of power in the region, patterns of amity and enmity represent socially constructed relations from a Wendtian perspective. At this point, it can be regarded as a combination of realism and constructivism.

There are several security complexes in the international system for the Regional Security Complex Theory. Political, geographical, economic, historical, strategic, or cultural factors may bring a group of states together and enable these security complexes to form and interact with one another. It is argued that the main factor in the formation of complexes is the common threat perception (Buzan 106) and that anarchy and geographical proximities are the phenomena that create regional complexes. According to Buzan, states located around the world are dependent on each other for security. Geographical proximity is an important factor in the formation of this dependence. Countries that are geographically close to each other have a higher level of dependency than those far away. When close-range threats are compared with long-range threats, it emerges that close-range threats are more effective in terms of their results (Buzan 106–10).

Therefore, according to the RSCT, four factors are sought for a security complex to form: “(i) Consist of two or more states, (ii) these states form a geographically coherent region, (iii) create a positive or negative security

interdependence, and (iv) develop a deep and long-term, if not permanent, security interdependence” (Buzan et al. 15).

The theory gives a new perspective on regional security. It also presents the issue of security interdependence as the pioneering element in the formation of complexes. The security of the states located in the same region and the security of other actors are positively or negatively dependent on each other. Positive interdependence implies that the situation in which a state in the region feels threatened and has security concerns will directly cause other states to feel threatened. In this context, each state has to establish direct relations with each other to ensure intra-regional security. Negative interdependence indicates that the securitization processes of states within a complex are formed as a result of hostile relations with each other. On the one hand, if the securitization policies of the states are taken into consideration, the security dilemmas of developing regional cooperation and resorting to alliance-style organizations to gain or maintain their interests in a region in the globalizing system create a regional security complex. On the other hand, the unending conflict and the alliances shaped by it also form complexes. In this respect, regional security complexes take place in three spectrums in accordance with their formation types: conflict formation, security regime, and security community (Buzan and Wæver 53). The three types of complex formations represent the Wendtian perspective on social structures. Conflict formations align with the Hobbesian view, security regimes with the Lockean perspective, and security communities embody Kantian structures. These three categories of communities form a spectrum ranging from extreme violence on one end to a well-defined set of rules on the other.

According to their types, security complexes are divided into four categories based on power distributions: Standard, Centred (Super Power, Great Power, Regional Power, Institutional), Great Power, and Super complexes (Buzan and Wæver 62). While Standard complexes are shaped by regional powers, Centred complexes are formed around a superpower or great power. Great Power and Supercomplexes are complexes with more than one great power. Great Powers play a crucial role in Regional Security Complexes. According to Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll, regional powers are the main influencers of Regional Security Complexes’ security policy directions



(Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll 741). Regional powers' roles and orientations are the determiners of the regional security order, which Buzan and Wæver describe as formation type. Unlike Buzan and Wæver, Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll group five formation types: Hegemonic security, power restraining power, concert, security community, and unstructured (Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll 733). However, for the purpose of evaluating the seminal work of Buzan and Wæver, this article adheres to the original typology of formations.

Amable (2) also emphasizes the impact of great powers on the formation processes of Regional Security Complexes. In contrast to the predominant focus of the mainstream literature on the Regional Security Complex Theory, which concentrates on established complexes, Amable illustrates how adjacent great powers contribute to altering the complex's structure. This perspective firmly asserts that Regional Security Complexes are not inherently self-transformative entities; rather, they are molded by the dynamics of great power competitions, collaborations, and rule-setting.

From this point of view, the formation of a security complex or subcomplex is the result of the interaction of the four levels of analysis. Securitization of each state regarding vulnerability and their relations with other states in the complex constitute the first and second levels, respectively. Thirdly, the relations of the security complex with other complexes, and finally the relation of global powers to the complex reveals the characteristics of a region. In addition, there are subcomplexes embedded within a Regional Security Complex.

The reasons why Buzan and Wæver classify Central Asia as a subcomplex within the post-Soviet security complex will be summarized, and their claim that Central Asia is a separate regional security complex will be explained in the next section.

### **Post-Soviet regional complex and Central Asia subcomplex**

Buzan and Wæver define post-Soviet geography as a Russia-centred complex consisting of four subcomplexes: “the Baltic states, the Western group of states, the Caucasus, and Central Asia” (Buzan and Wæver 397) due to the fact that Russia is the sole actor in the balance of power in the post-Soviet space. On the other hand, the relationship among each of the subcomplexes is limited or negligible. For example, Russia plays a significant role in the

securitization processes of both the Baltics and Central Asia. However, the interaction between the Baltics and Central Asian states is limited, and each region does not play a significant role in the formation of a complex. Therefore, the relationships of each Russia-centred subcomplex at the four levels of analysis differ from each other.

In their analysis in the book of *Regional Security Complexes* in 2003, Buzan and Wæver evaluated the post-Soviet complex as a “conflict formation” that Central Asia and the Caucasus were relatively high conflict zones (Buzan and Wæver 398). However, their analysis becomes somewhat unclear when delving into the specifics of their work. Their assertions are rooted in the premise that states have achieved independence. Consequently, they argue that Regional Security Complexes emerged or were immediately engulfed in hostility as a result (Buzan and Wæver 398). Within this framework, Central Asia, being a recently independent region, is perceived to carry a heightened risk of conflict. However, pinpointing instances of conflict formation in the section dedicated to the examination of Central Asia proves to be challenging. While they claimed that the conflicts occurred between the states in the Caucasus, non-state actors were securitized in Central Asia. Yet, they see Central Asia only as a potential conflict zone because of the competition among the newly independent states. At this point, especially considering the possibility of Uzbekistan’s efforts to establish hegemony in the region, they included the idea that Russian hegemony may decrease over time. That is to say, their assertion regarding conflict formation in Central Asia remains primarily as an abstract model.

However, they emphasized that the main security issue of Central Asian states is domestic security. Accordingly, regime security is the primary security concern of all states in Central Asia. In addition, the activities of radical groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, especially in the Fergana region, led to further securitization by the countries in the region after 9/11. At this point, Buzan and Wæver claimed that Russia played an important role in securitizing terrorism and putting it on the agenda of international organizations, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Buzan and Wæver 410). Finally, transboundary problems such as drug trafficking and organized crime constitute the top agenda of the countries in the region. On the other hand, except for the Fergana

region, there are no border and territorial problems between the countries in the region. Since there was no struggle between the states, there was no blocking or alliance either (Buzan and Wæver 426). As a result, Central Asia did not become the scene of power competition.

Regarding inter-regional relations, Buzan and Wæver assert that, contrary to expectation of a new great game in Central Asia, such a game did not materialize after the Cold War. The authors emphasized Russia's eagerness to increase its penetration in the region through the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), while GUAM<sup>2</sup> was considered a countervailing force against Russia. Although GUAM lacked the capacity to balance the Russia, the authors considered it crucial for predicting the future of the region. This was because the possibility of US penetration into the region, facilitated by its cooperation with regional power Uzbekistan in the war on terror, created an opportunity for the region to move away from the Russia-centred complex. However, this anticipated shift ultimately did not transpire due to the absence of intra-regional competition and Uzbekistan's subsequent distancing from the US. It was noted that with the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), China accepted Russian domination in Central Asia, and it was argued that the interaction of the region with other complexes, in general, remained limited (Buzan and Wæver 431–32). As a result, the region transformed into neither Great Power Complex nor Supercomplexes.

Last but not least, regarding the interaction among the four levels of analysis that culminate in the formation of a regional security complex, Buzan and Wæver posit that, within the post-Soviet Regional Security Complex, all states except Russia engage in interactions across the domestic and regional tiers (Buzan and Wæver 435). As evidenced, the authors emphasize that as of 2003, the inter-regional interactions within Central Asia were notably constrained, categorizing it as a sub-complex within the broader Russia-centered complex.

Considering the changing landscape of international politics, the original study of Buzan and Wæver needs to be reevaluated after two decades. Additionally, it has some minor disputed evaluations. This leads us to address two issues regarding the Security Complex of Central Asia. First, the shortcomings of the original text of Buzan and Wæver need to be

reevaluated. Second, the changing patterns of power distribution, as well as enmity and amity in the region over the past two decades, have to be analyzed to understand how the security complex of Central Asia evolved throughout the 2010s and 2020s. The following section will elaborate on these two issues.

### **Central Asia: Mumpsimus and changing patterns**

As has been demonstrated, Buzan and Wæver's seminal work on Regional Security Complex Theory guided IR scholars not only in contemporary security studies but also in area studies. Their ingenious model indeed shed light on the developments taking place not only in Central Asia but all over the world in the early 2000s. Still, there are some shortcomings in their ideas about Central Asia. This situation causes some issues to be problematic from the beginning in the analysis of Central Asia.

First and foremost, the assertion that the region constitutes a conflict formation is questionable, particularly in terms of intra-state conflicts. While there are evident border disputes, the authors themselves acknowledge that actual conflict within Central Asia remains minimal. This is mainly due to the fact that the amity and enmity relations are very recent and unconventional in Central Asia. The region is essentially post-colonial, and as the authors already elaborated, at least some identities are artificial, created by the Soviet Union. As stated in the literature, Central Asia is a region that took its present form after the 1930s, within the framework of the "Divide and Rule" policies under the Soviet Union (Carrère d'Encausse 177–78). In fact, the territories that make up contemporary Kazakhstan was known as the "Kyrgyz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic" between 1920-1925. Therefore, the development of any enmity or conflict among the countries in Central Asia is neither in the historical narrative nor in the post-independence period.

These two features have given rise to unconventional practices in the hierarchy of securitization within the region. The most evident manifestation is observed in border-related issues. Contrary to public expectations, the ruling elites tend to downplay discourses regarding border disputes (Nourzhanov 99). Traditional security concerns like border disputes and water management are scarcely addressed by these elites. Instead, their emphasis lies on non-

state actors, specifically separatism, extremism, and organized crime, when participating in diplomatic discussions and international platforms such as the SCO or the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). Furthermore, the narratives of threat are significantly influenced by great power intervention (Nourzhanov 90; Koch 19) due to these states' recent attainment of independence. This discourse of securitization is essentially intertwined with the securitization of non-state actors. The foremost goal of Central Asian leaders is to uphold political stability. Nonetheless, non-state actors supported by the United States are perceived as sources of destabilization. Consequently, the region's paramount concern revolves around either non-state actors or intervention by major powers. To put it differently, enmity patterns are shaped by external powers and non-state actors, while amicable relations remain in their infancy, primarily evident in intra-regional dynamics and, conceivably, among perceived non-aggressive states such as China and Türkiye through the SCO and OTS platforms.

The second shortcoming, linked to the previous point, involves the assertion of hegemonic attitudes among local powers. Although along with some scholars of that period (Luong and Weinthal 62), Buzan and Wæver claimed that Uzbekistan aimed to become a regional hegemon (Buzan and Wæver 425), it is hard to find convincing evidence to prove this argument. Clearly, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were the promising hegemonic candidates in Central Asia regarding their relative capacities. Yet, referring to their military expenditures (The World Bank) and policy priorities, neither of them seems to be attempted hegemonic ambitions in the region. Unlike the expectations, Uzbekistan focused on internal consolidation and economic stability throughout the 1990s. It sought self-reliance in international politics (Fazendeiro 4), with no territorial claims in the neighborhood reinforced by strict border controls (D. R. Spechler and M. C. Spechler 160). Therefore, as a newly independent state, the top agenda of Uzbek Foreign Policy has been domestic security consolidants rather than international penetration. In the end, Uzbekistan did not form an alliance to balance Kazakhstan or another regional actor either. Therefore, neither internal nor external balance attempts were seen in the Uzbek government throughout the 1990s.

Due to these two factors, Central Asia appears to resemble more of a security regime. The securitization processes within all Central Asian states share

similarities, leading to a sense of security interdependence among them. These states predominantly securitize political security and accord lesser significance to military security. Moreover, their security concerns exhibit a mutual reliance for two main reasons. Firstly, the fear of a domino effect, exemplified by the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, compels the elites to align with one another and address territorial disputes collectively. This dynamic prompts a sense of cooperation among Central Asian states. Secondly, as demonstrated by the 2022 Kazakh unrest, Russia is still perceived as the primary stabilizing force by Central Asian elites. This reaffirms the notion that the region remains predominantly under the influence of a Russia-centered security complex. As a result of these considerations, Central Asia's characteristics and security dynamics align more closely with those of a security regime. In this regard, it is more open to transforming into a security community in the future. This leads us to elaborate on the changing patterns in Central Asia since 2003. Over the two decades, significant transformations occurred at domestic, regional, and interregional levels. That is to say, the gap between the inter-regional and intra-regional relations widened, which makes a regional security complex more prominent.

The inter-regional dynamics of the Central Asian sub-complex have undergone changes in two significant aspects, culminating in the consolidation of Russian influence in the region rather than a competition among Great Powers. Primarily, the presence of the United States dwindled by the mid-2010s. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, Uzbekistan emerged as a key partner of the US in the region, primarily due to their joint efforts in the war on terror. However, Uzbekistan's alignment with the US ceased in 2005. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the US pursued a policy of "democratization" in Central Asia. However, this democratization approach was often interpreted as an attempt to replace incumbent leaders with pro-American figures rather than actively supporting democratic institutionalization (Nogayeva 195). Even amidst its counterterrorism initiatives, Uzbekistan wasn't an exception to this trend. The US efforts to influence the Uzbek government led to the Andijan events in 2005, perceived by Tashkent as an endeavor to incite a color revolution. These events led to a significant deterioration in US-Uzbek relations. Consequently, the US military base in Uzbekistan was promptly closed, and American troops were withdrawn. Similarly, Kyrgyzstan shut down the US military base at Manas

in 2014. This resulted in the absence of any remaining US bases in the region. As a consequence, the limited scope of US influence within Central Asia lost effectiveness. Consequently, the potential for transforming the Russia-centered complex was substantially weakened. More importantly, a possible New Great Game has become a reference object of securitization not only for Russia but also for the local governments.

In contrast to the decline of US influence, relations with China and Türkiye have developed and evolved over time. However, this development has not occurred in opposition to Russia, but rather in alignment with Russia's interests. Türkiye's relationship with Turkic states is primarily based on cultural diplomacy (Purtaş 97). Although the cooperation between Turkic states and Türkiye has the potential to transform into an alliance via the OTS, the existence of CIS and Collective Security Treaty Organization keeps posing limits for further integration (Kocatepe). Similarly, the strengthening of Sino-Russian ties has become more pronounced, especially since 2018 when China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Eurasian Economic Union became interconnected. As Buzan and Wæver asserted in 2003 that the two great powers keep acting jointly in the region against the US unipolarity (Buzan and Wæver 431). This institutional cooperation between these two powers has solidified the existing power dynamics in the region, ensuring Russian security and progressively isolating the region from global affairs while drawing it closer to Russia post-2005. Despite numerous analyses suggesting that the post-Cold War era has ushered in a New Great Game in Central Asia (Scott; Menon), the withdrawal of US military presence after 2005, decreased EU engagement, and, in stark contrast, the enduring Russian military presence in the region lead us to conclude that the likelihood of the New Great Game claims materializing in the near future is slim. Throughout the past two decades, political, economic, and military collaborations have been institutionally established either through Russia's actions or via Sino-Russian collaborations, as seen in the cases of CSTO and SCO. Cultural cooperation, on the other hand, has been institutionalized by Türkiye through the OTS. Significantly, the absence of intra-regional competition negates the opportunity and necessity for external actors to deeply penetrate the region. Consequently, it's challenging to assert that the region has truly become a backdrop for a new great game.

Intra-regional relations, on the other hand, started to become more visible both in securitization and desecuritization processes. The relationships among the five Central Asian states have relatively heightened since 2003. As a matter of fact, although the Central Asian states did not interact with each other too much, nor did they see each other as rivals from the very beginning. Notably, a significant development in this context is the desecuritization of border disputes. With the exception of the Tajik-Kyrgyz clashes in 2022, the five Central Asian states have largely refrained from engaging in direct state-to-state conflicts. For instance, the border issue between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan was amicably resolved through mutual agreement in November 2022. Instead of viewing each other as immediate security threats, these states have securitized primarily in the political and societal sectors, concentrating on non-state actors. To address their cross-border disputes, they have internationalized their security concerns through institutions like the CIS and the SCO, particularly after 2005, thereby fostering opportunities for cooperation. This cooperative approach has also been echoed within the OST, where the same shared concerns have been addressed. Another pivotal development was the leadership transition in Uzbekistan. Mirziyoyev's initiative has been paving strong regional cooperation in Central Asia (Patnaik 155). As an illustration, the two biggest states, namely Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, signed an alliance treaty in 2022 to enhance regional security. Therefore, the collaboration of Central Asian states has been increasing against non-state actors. In other words, the Central Asian states have started to get closer to each other, albeit late.

Finally, same reference objects of securitization are evident in all Central Asian states. The most prominent is the political security sector. The Kyrgyz revolutions of 2005 and 2010, along with the Andijan event, served to reinforce the securitization of political stability by governments. Notably, while regime preservation has always been a paramount concern for leaders, it didn't ascend to the top of their agendas until 2005. This pivotal year marked the emergence of a prevailing sentiment in Central Asia that the securitization of democratic processes posed a considerable threat to the survival of regimes in the region. The year 2005 marked the emergence of a widespread perception in Central Asia that the securitization of democracy posed a significant risk to the survival of regimes in the region owing to the Tulip Revolution of Kyrgyzstan and events in Uzbekistan (Nourzhanov 92).



This led the five Central Asian states to cooperate against domestic threats. As a result, the first local regionalization efforts defined as “protective integration” began to be visible (Allison 188) owing to the securitization of the political sector.

Therefore, the Central Asia subcomplex engaged less and less with other actors after 2003. This means that the four levels of interactions of the Complex have become more straight and compact: A higher level of interaction among each other as well as Russia but less engagement at global and inter-regional levels. More importantly, changes at all levels are fundamentally related to political securitization in one way or another. Therefore, the main security dynamic of the region is regime survival.

On the other hand, it is hard to assert that the region has completely transformed. As has been mentioned, Russian unipolarity is the decisive structural character of the Complex and consolidated throughout the 2010s, despite the penetration efforts of the USA and China. Central Asian countries are still strongly reliant on Russia for infrastructure, trade contacts, labor employment, and global commerce and energy links (Uslu 31). Another continuity takes place in the political sector, which is the securitization of non-state actors, namely extremism, separatism, and organized crime. In the end, extremism still exists in the region. The transformation of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan into Daesh is the most prominent example of this. Thus, the main pillars of the Central Asian subcomplex maintain the balance of power and patterns of amity and enmity in the region. In this regard, the following section will examine the implications of the changing patterns in the Central Asia subcomplex and discuss them in the context of Buzan and Wæver’s projections.

### **From subcomplex to separate complex?**

Referring back to the introduction of the article, Buzan and Wæver assessed Central Asia as a potential separate complex, contingent upon either the decline of Russian hegemony or US presence in the region. The internal dynamics of the region, which had not yet settled into place at that time, had increased this possibility. Now, over 30 years after gaining independence, both rivalry between great powers and the internal dynamics in Central Asia have begun to gain some evidence.

Firstly, Russia is still the most important actor in the region, whereas the US influence deteriorated, particularly after 2005. Therefore, the polarity structure of the complex has not changed. Russia is the only country with military deployment in the region, while the US troops withdrew in 2014, and China has only one post in Tajikistan. Russian military presence is considered the maintenance of political stability by the local leaders against separatism and social turmoil. This makes the complex still a Russia-centred Great Power System.

Secondly, the main subject matter of the complex has become political security. While territorial disputes (military security), ethnic minorities (societal security), and economic independence (economic security) were desecuritized in 30 years, all five republics in the complex put regime survival forward. From this point of view, it can be asserted that if Central Asia separates from Post-Soviet Regional Complex in the future, political securitization would be the main pillar of the new complex.

Thirdly, the complex is characterized by a focus on improving cooperation among states rather than regional rivalry. No state within the complex sought hegemony, which prevented the formation of alliances against each other. Until recently, cooperation and alliances primarily occurred through Russian-led international institutions such as the CIS or SCO, with the aim of collaborating against non-state actors rather than each other. The Uzbek-Kazakh rapprochement can be seen as a pioneering example of local cooperation, which also aims to address issues of terrorism, separatism, and organized crime. The spillover effect of this bilateral cooperation is expected to lead to further cooperative efforts against terrorism and coup attempts.

These three developments have become defining features of the Central Asia Subcomplex within the Post-Soviet Regional Security Complex. The processes of securitization and desecuritization, as well as the formation of alliances, are more discernible in 2023 compared to 2003. This indicates the emergence of a more distinct area within the post-Soviet space. However, it is premature to assert that Central Asia is a separate Regional Security Complex, given the continued influence of Russia in the region. Although Buzan and Wæver suggested that a potential decline of Russian influence could lead to the region's separation, they also considered such a scenario as unlikely. Thus, a possible "New Great Game" scenario, which

is highly discussed and advocated by some scholars, should be considered. Nevertheless, the combination of the waning influence of the US and the continued Russian military presence in the region leads us to the conclusion that the likelihood of these New Great Game assertions materializing in the foreseeable future is rather slim. Therefore, we concur with their assessment that Central Asia remains a subcomplex of the Post-Soviet Regional Security Complex, albeit with the possibility of forming another complex, albeit to a lesser extent.

### **Conclusion and Future Projections**

Central Asia is still a subcomplex 20 years after the seminal study of Buzan and Wæver. Yet, the subcomplex has some characteristics compared to 2003. We assert that political securitization is the catalyst for complex formation in Central Asia. We also argue that except for the Tajik Civil War, the region is stable, which makes it a security region. Still, the securitization of politics may transform it into a security community in the future thanks to improving cooperation of states against non-state actors. Most significantly, the presence of Russia in the region, coupled with its relative isolation from other geopolitical complexes, serves as a key deterrent against the fragmentation of the existing complex.

This raises the question of what are the future projections for the region. As Buzan and Wæver already asserted that if Russian hegemony declines, the region would form another regional security complex. The Russo-Ukrainian War may inspire future predictions, if not solely determines. A possible defeat to Russia or a longer-than-expected war may lead it to act more indifferently or reluctant towards Central Asia. An alternative scenario, such as rising US hegemony or Chinese penetration, is less likely to stage. Therefore, the region will either keep being Russia-centred Great Power Complex or, less probably, transform into a Standard Complex. In case the region divides from Russia, the new security complex has the potential to be a security community thanks to increasing cooperation against non-state actors as a result of prioritizing political security. However, the continuation of the current situation is not an obstacle to cooperation, and political securitization strengthens the possibility of a further increase in bilateral relations.

In conclusion, Central Asia continues to be one of the four subcomplexes within the Post-Soviet Regional Security Complex. This can primarily be attributed to the power distribution favoring Russia and its enduring influence in the region. However, regional cooperation has been advancing in countering non-state actors through the securitization of the political sector. This progress has the potential to transform the region from a security region into a security community.

### **Contribution Rate Statement**

The authors' contribution rates in this study are equal.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of this study. There is no conflict of interest between the authors.

### **Notes**

- 1 According to Buzan and Wæver, Central Asia, refers to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.
- 2 A union of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova. It became GUUAM with the inclusion of Uzbekistan in 1999, and again GUAM with its abandonment in 2002.

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