

Nadine Godehardt, *The Chinese Constitution of Central Asia: Regional and Intertwined Actors in International Relations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), Pages: vii+219, Price: £-65.00.

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This is an engaging piece of work which takes an innovative approach on Chinese expert discourse on Central Asia – analysing how Chinese define Central Asia. At the same time the author offers an inside perspective on Chinese voices whose meanings are rarely examined in Chinese International Relations (IR) studies. The volume is thus a contribution to theorising the China-Central Asia regional security from IR perspective imbued with recent theories. The author argues there has, as yet, not been a ‘post-regionalist’ movement in IR. According to the author, most regional studies are built upon a similar ontological premise, one which characterises in particular the relationship between researchers and the world, as well as how researchers produce knowledge about the world. In chapter two, the author focuses on two areas: first, regions and regionalism and second, typologies of regional order. The former is clustered along two lines: first, cooperation- comprising the different approach to regionalism and second, security – which refers to approaches such as the Regional Security Complex (RSC) theory.

Introducing theoretical foundations of the book, the author in the first chapter argues that the researcher cannot simply refer to regions as though they are ‘natural givens’. Regions are historically and politically constituted by actors that are always already embedded in the world at large. Thus, when scholars speak of regions such as Central Asia, East Asia or Latin America many – at their core, political – decisions about how they are made understand these spaces have already been taken. In addition, when analysts look at regions by way of reference to a specific institutional mechanism – such as, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), MERCOSUR, or Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) – it becomes apparent how they draw a line between geographic and political regions. The former seems to be simply out there and does not receive much attention, which the latter needs to be politically and socially constructed.

The author further enquires about who actually constitutes regions, following the post-foundational perspectives; the task is to stay aware of not 'have to start somewhere' but are actually always already embedded somewhere. Only from this viewpoint is the statement that "regions are what actors are making them" not simply mistaken as being another form of constructivism.

The author deals with questions of epistemology and methodology, particularly how the constitution of regions can best be analysed. He has initially introduced and discussed the problem of a regional level of analysis in IR. In line with ontological assumptions, the national, regional and global levels of analysis are hereby considered to be about actors' relations. Consequently, these relations unfold the complex web of activities that an actor is constantly creating – and is at the same time also embedded in. The author then extensively concentrates on the term action, which is not simply understood as practices or deeds but also embraces the use of languages.

In the book the author introduces the complex matter of regional relations in Central Asia, as well as China's link to it through her Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous region. Chapter five highlights exactly how China is embedded in her immediate Western neighbourhood. The book discusses the failure to date to launch any successful Central Asia regional integration projects; it coincides with certain degree of indifference that characterises the relationships between the five Central Asian republics. It seems that the five states, which are together often simply defined as a region, are for most part not interested in building up any kind of regional mechanism. They have not and do not promote a political organisation for formalisation of relationships. On the contrary, they have actually instead strengthened their relations with great power outside the Central Asia. The five republics have joined regional organisation hat and have been exclusively initiated and supported by their organisations that have further been exclusively initiated and supported by China and Russia. The existence of many organisations (CIS, CSTO, EurAsEC, SCO) that all exceed in scope the five Central Asian republics alone clearly underscores the fuzziness of what can be understood as 'Central Asia' in the first place.

Kazakhstan's lone attempts to create a Central Asian union comprising only the five republics themselves have been impeded by one of the potential member states. In short, Central Asia is characterised by a certain political emptiness but this emptiness is not apolitical or meaningless. It is, on the contrary, highly political – although it is not usually regarded such. Further he argues if China is a regional or just another external power trying to play her own game in what is usually referred to as 'Central Asia'. The question about

China being entwined with her immediate Western neighbourhood highlights two key issues. First, China's dilemma over regional territoriality; in other words, the specific territorial trap that the country is caught in, one that makes China, both, a part of Central Asia and at the same time also separates the country from its immediate neighbourhood. Second, it illustrates that usually a priori fixation of regional boundaries is, in fact, an ongoing process. It is a process that is absolutely not static, but is rather a question of constant and never ending political articulation. This is particularly the case with China's constitution of her immediate Western neighbourhood or, as we will see, of 'Chinese Central Asia'.

In Chapter six, the author analyses the Chinese language material that helps us understand what Chinese experts mean when they write or speak of 'Central Asia'. This chapter demonstrates how Chinese experts constitute, interpret or simply understand their Central Asian neighbourhood. In the analysis of what Chinese experts write and say about Central Asia, primarily turned to the interpretation of experts dealing with the transition from the Shanghai Five Forum to the SCO. The establishment of the SCO as a regional organisation has set China-Central Asia relations apart from ties in Asia. The SCO has been widely supported by Chinese leadership; it can even be argued that without China's initiative, SCO would never have been created in the first place. The author argues that Chinese Central Asia experts using their understanding of current issues and recent developments in the region, may have their interest in emphasising how exactly these experts refer to China's Western neighbourhood.

The question of how the SCO should react in future to any mass casual incidents that occur in one of the SCO member states to any indeed in the wider regional neighbourhood – particularly given the violent scenarios that might unfold in post-2014 Afghanistan – is one of the most pressing questions that SCO and China will need to deal with in the near future. With regard to this last aspect, as well as to the still prominent concerns over regional security and the maintenance of regional stability, Chinese Central Asia refers to a region far bigger than the five post-Soviet Republics-and it thus specifically includes Afghanistan and Xinjinag. This inescapable reality, in turn, inevitably ties China – at least for the foreseeable future – to her immediate Western neighbourhood.

The book succeeds in producing a coherent account of China; is increasingly uncertain about the impact that post-Soviet 2014 Afghanistan will potentially have on the country itself, on Central Asia and on South Asia and, consequently, on the many regions that China is entwined with. Since the Chinese notion of what comprises Central Asia changes tremendously depending on the issue at

stake, the emergence of this new challenge underscores that China can no 'longer hide away from her responsibilities in the heartland and simply bide her time'. In fact, China is now 'all in' – and at some point in the near future, it will need to start acting as such.

This study is instructive not only for those who wish to comprehend the Central Asia region but also for those who wish to understand the changing nature of the region in and around Central Asia. It offers China's commitments in Central Asia due to the potentially unstable situation in post-2014 Afghanistan. The author brings forth the region as one that has reinvented and refashioned itself over a period of time.