


The Institutionalisation of Environmentalism in Central Asia



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Abstract In 2021, in a largely ignored yet significant step towards regional coordination and convergence, the Central Asian republics took part in the 26th Conference of the Parties in Glasgow as a single entity, speaking with one voice and advocating a joint approach to climate change. Yet, to what extent is Central Asia complying with the norms and rules of environmental governance? Are environmental protection, climate-change mitigation and the push for an energy transition merely a set of shallow practices and rhetoric to signal performative compliance, or are they based on a logic of appropriateness and embedded in a normative understanding of green politics? Drawing on recent scholarship on international society and based on the assumption that environmentalism is now an established institution of the contemporary international order, this chapter considers whether, and in what way, Central Asia has embraced the institution of environmentalism, exploring discourses and practices at the global, regional and local levels. Far from being an exercise in pure theorisation, this can help shape policy engagement from and with the region, allowing us to assess the depth of commitment of these republics and societies in fighting climate change by distinguishing challenges deriving from structural, instrumental or ideological factors.

Keywords Environmentalism · Institutionalisation · Central Asia · Climate change · International norms

1 Introduction

From 31 October to 12 November 2021, the 26th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations (UN) Framework Convention on Climate Change took place in Glasgow, Scotland. Given the dire situation in which the world finds itself with respect to climate change and future predicted environmental disasters, there were

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great expectations as to what concrete, bold moves could be agreed on at this event. One of the most striking aspects of the conference was that, in a rare display of international multilateralism and unity, the Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) took part as a single regional group with a unitary voice, sharing proposals and even the same pavilion under the slogan ‘5 countries, 1 region, 1 voice’ (ECIFAS-TJ 2021).

This unity, while surprising because of the continuous underlying tensions that fracture the region, especially regarding border disputes and problems related to water management, is perhaps less surprising given the importance of the environment, both historically and socially, for Central Asia. It is not by chance that in one of the sharpest analyses produced on the relationship between environment and society in Central Asia, the late Shirin Akiner aptly used the concept of ‘symbiosis’ to describe the importance that the steppe and the oases have played for the Central Asian populations economically, culturally, socially and even religiously (Akiner et al. 2020). After all, the nexus between the environment, development and security is a fundamental factor affecting the regional landscape of the Central Asian republics. In this respect, it is worth remembering that, not without difficulty, the five states have managed to set up the only nuclear-weapon-free zone in the northern hemisphere, in a region surrounded by great nuclear powers, precisely thanks to the way in which environmental and human security have been pitched both at the inter-state level and across civil society in the area, mostly thanks to the push provided by organisations such as the international anti-nuclear movement Nevada-Semipalatinsk (founded in 1989 in Kazakhstan and led by the poet Olzhas Suleimenov) towards fostering a green consciousness and a prototype of green activism in the region.

Drawing on this background, this chapter provides initial answers to the following question: *Has environmentalism been institutionalised in Central Asia?* ‘Environmentalism’ in this context is defined as a set of principles, discourses, behaviours and norms aimed at protecting the planet and humanity from the effects of climate change and fostering a way of living that is respectful of the environment. The term ‘institution’ refers to deep and relatively durable social practices which have evolved rather than being designed. Given that an international relations lens is being applied here, these practices must not only be shared by members of international society (i.e. states), but also be recognised by them as legitimate behaviour (Buzan 2004). In this context, institutions are thus about the shared identity of members of international society. They are constitutive of both individual states and international society as a whole in that they define not only the basic character of states but also their patterns of legitimate behaviour in relation to each other, as well as the criteria for membership in international society—thus, they have a regulatory as well as a constitutive dimension.

While some works exist on climate change and Central Asia, especially from a natural sciences perspective (Liu et al. 2020; Yu et al. 2021), the discipline of international relations (IR) is still in its infancy when it comes to assessing the status

of environmentalism in the region (Vakulchuk et al. 2022). When an IR prism is adopted to study environmental politics and related concerns in the region, the analysis often reverts to common tropes of security, conflict, the scramble for resources and dynamics reminiscent of the New Great Game narrative (for an exception see Weinthal 2002). Instead, this chapter seeks to advance recent scholarship on norms, rules and legitimacy in (regional) international governance from a Central Asian perspective, and by relying specifically on the concept of ‘institution’ intends to unpack the socio-structural incentives and constraints that Central Asia faces when it comes to environmentalism. In this respect the chapter may be seen as an advancement in scholarship and a pioneering work, both in terms of *topic* and in terms of *theory* adopted.

In order to understand whether, and to what extent, environmentalism has been established as an institution in Central Asia, I have had to limit the scope of the research. First, in terms of geographical area, this chapter will consider ‘Central Asia’ to be the five post-Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, although with the awareness that, especially with respect to such a transnational and ‘wicked’ problem as the environment, borders and boundaries are meaningless (Falkner 2021). This, however, is done for necessity and for coherence with the rest of this volume.

Second, in order to assess the degree of institutionalisation, this essay will consider discourses and practices (the fundamental components of institutions in a sociological sense) at the international, regional and domestic levels. This is done because, if institutionalisation is manifest only in international forums, without sustained processes within the region itself, it would likely amount only to institutional mimicking, that is to say, a display of virtuosity absent implementation. The level of institutionalisation, then, goes hand-in-hand with state machinery, i.e. the development of structures, bodies, legislation, initiatives and other practices that demonstrate a commitment to the principle at the heart of the institution under examination, and the willingness to consolidate it.

Third, as institutions contain a deontic component of appropriateness and conformity, the analysis will also consider the elements of ‘rightful conduct’, ‘necessity’ and ‘moral need’ to comply with environmental norms. This, again, is the advantage of the sociological take on institutions as opposed to a mere cost–benefit analysis.

What my analysis seeks to offer, therefore, is a form of middle-range theorising about environmentalism in Central Asia, which takes into consideration the ‘birds-eye view’ of the international and regional levels, as well as the main institutional markers within states. Conscious that this chapter relies on a state-centric understanding of international relations, what I will not take into account here is the role of civil society activism and bottom-up initiatives, as this is covered by other chapters in this volume. The hope, however, is that this contribution will serve as a useful, if preliminary, overarching framework within which to contextualise and situate the ‘greening’ of Central Asia.

2 The International Level

At the international level, it is easy to verify the institutionalisation of environmentalism in the Central Asian republics. A good starting point is the signing and ratification of the Paris Agreement, the biggest multilateral climate change related treaty in force at present which aims to bring all nations into a common process to undertake ambitious efforts to combat climate change and adapt to its effects (Paris Agreement, n.d.).

To begin with, all five Central Asian republics have signed and ratified the Paris Agreement, which entered into force in 2016. They have also all undergone at least once an Environmental Performance Review, an important voluntary peer-review mechanism to support member countries of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe in improving their environmental management and performance (UNECE, n.d.). In terms of other commitments from an international law perspective, the picture is a bit more mixed. In fact, the number of environmental agreements in force, including both multilateral and bilateral documents as well as binding and non-binding, are as follows: 323 for Kazakhstan; 195 for Kyrgyzstan; 160 for Tajikistan; 186 for Turkmenistan and 155 for Uzbekistan (Mitchell 2022).

Although these numbers vary for a variety of reasons, such as the relevance of the treaty for a given country, or simply the fact that ‘not all states possess the same capacity to deal with similar environmental problems’ (Weinthal 2002, 12), they denote a commitment at the international level to incorporate relevant international environmental legislation within the respective domestic legislative orders. Furthermore, the international dimension of the legitimacy of environmentalism as a standard of conduct, and as a constitutive as well as regulatory practice of post-Cold War international politics, is visible in the number of statements made by Central Asian leaders from all republics since 1991. While for reasons of space, it is impossible to report all speeches in this chapter, three examples may suffice.

Firstly, at the 17th plenary session of the UN General Assembly in 1994, Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov maintained that

We are grateful to the United Nations and to the specialized agencies concerned with environmental control and with the prevention of global ecological disasters. We are ready to provide all possible assistance in this noble task. (Kamilov 1994)

Secondly, at the 19th special session of the UN General Assembly in 1997, the First President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev proclaimed that

It is therefore very important to adhere strictly to the principles of the Rio Declaration, ensuring that economic growth takes place only in relationship to processes of social development and environmental security. (Nazarbayev 1997)

And thirdly, and more recently, Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov argued in front of the UN General Assembly at its 76th plenary session that

For three decades, Kyrgyzstan has been an active promoter of the interests of landlocked mountain states in the international arena in order to address the problems of sustainable development and the impact of climate change. (quoted in Osmonalieva 2021)

An analysis of these speeches sheds light on the fact that, not only have the Central Asian republics been legitimising environmentalism as an institution of international society, but they have also been insisting on the role of the UN in spearheading the way in addressing inequalities, dangers and insecurity deriving from climate change and environmental degradation. Moreover, it is not just the UN that is being addressed, but also and especially the complex cosmos of institutions, agencies, donors and epistemic communities that play a role in keeping the environmental spotlight (as well as welcome investments and programmes) focused on Central Asia.

At the international level, the Central Asian states have launched several initiatives over the years aimed at drawing the international community's attention towards environmental issues in the region. These include the 'International Decade for Action: Water for Sustainable Development, 2018–2028', initiated by Tajikistan (Rahmon 2021), and a new draft resolution entitled 'Nature knows no borders: transboundary cooperation is a key factor in the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity' proposed by Kyrgyzstan (Zheenbekov 2020). These initiatives, while symbolic, have had the effect of legitimising, sustaining and enhancing a 'green discourse' in, about and from Central Asia, which positions the region firmly within the process of institutionalisation of environmental stewardship (Falkner and Buzan 2019). These initiatives also have the merit of creating a financial, normative and bureaucratic conduit between international society and the region. At COP26, this was evident in the words of Zafar Makhmudov, the Executive Director of the Regional Environmental Center for Central Asia. According to him, the joint pavilion provided Central Asian countries 'with a **unique opportunity to demonstrate their investment potential, their role in the global climate process, their perspectives and current needs for financing, technologies and expertise**' (CARECECO 2021). This leads us to the regional level.

3 The Regional Level

At the regional level—that is, relating to the international relations *between* the Central Asian republics—the institutionalisation of environmentalism started as early as 1992 and continued throughout the 1990s with, first, an inter-ministerial agreement between the newly independent republics (1992), then the agreement on the Aral Sea basin, signed in Qyzylorda, Kazakhstan, which gave birth to the International Fund for the Aral Sea (IFAS), then with the Nukus Declaration also relating to the Aral Sea in 1996 (Uzbekistan) and another region-wide inter-ministerial agreement on the rationalisation of the use of water in 1998. After that initial phase of institutionalisation, though, the early and mid-2000s did not yield many results in terms of environmental cooperation.

More recently, however, things have improved. Under the aegis of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), for example, negotiations are underway at the level of presidents and heads of government of Central Asia to determine and approve the water, energy and food balances (that is to say the sustainable equilibrium of

energy, water, and food exchanges between member states) in light of climate change (Masalieva 2022). IFAS aside, there are very few autochthonously institutionalised mechanisms for environmental protection and for mitigating the effects of climate change. There is a passing reference to ‘recognising the importance of consolidating efforts’ in the climate-change sphere (paragraph 17) within the 2021 Joint Statement of the Heads of State of Central Asia (Akorda 2022) and there is also the Green Bridge Initiative, launched by Kazakhstan in 2010, which has now entered the 2021–2024 phase of programme development. The latter, however, serves as another platform to conduct multi-stakeholder dialogue and activities in the region, as opposed to creating a mechanism for effectively monitoring the progress of the region towards reaching the stated objectives and environmental goals. It is also worth noting that Kazakhstan (the initiator) and Kyrgyzstan are the only two Central Asian countries represented in the initiative, although at COP26 Tajikistan signed an association agreement with Kazakhstan relating to the Green Bridge Initiative (Shayakhmetova 2021).

Keeping in mind the dual aspects of the institutions outlined above, i.e. regulatory and constitutive, it can be said that environmentalism does not play a significant constitutive role in Central Asia either. While countries occasionally look at each other comparing their own domestic situation with that of their neighbours in terms of economic development or political governance, seldom if ever does environmentalism work as a bond, or as a ‘standard of good governance’, between the Central Asian states. In this respect, therefore, it seems that environmentalism falls under the rubric of sovereign prerogatives and non-interference despite the obvious transnational nature of climate change and environmental degradation.

The institution of environmentalism in Central Asia is kept alive by international donors, organisations and consortia. For example, Central Asia has its own Climate Change Conference (CACCC), which has now been held for four years. CACCC is a continuation of the World Bank’s initiative on climate change knowledge and regional information exchange in Central Asia, launched in 2013, and is supported by the Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia (RECCA-CAREC) jointly as part of the World Bank/IFAS project ‘Climate Adaptation and Mitigation Program for the Aral Sea Basin’. It was in fact in the course of one of these conferences, held in Dushanbe in 2021, that the five Central Asian representatives developed the position that was then presented at COP26 in Glasgow, thus showing again the deep ‘internationalisation’ of the institution of environmentalism, that is, its dependence on the international community. In fact, it is CAREC, in partnership with the Interstate Commission for Sustainable Development (ICSD)¹ which was founded by the five Central Asian heads of state after the Qyzylorda meeting in 1993, that provides the best example of the ‘dual-track’ institutionalisation of environmentalism between the international and regional levels. The regional statement ‘Voice of Central Asia’, unanimously adopted by all the Central Asian states and presented at COP26 last November, was developed with the support of RECCA-CAREC in coordination with

¹ http://www.mkurca.org/mkur/polozhenie_mkur/.

ICSD, which also advocated for the establishment of the Regional Center for Climate Action Transparency in Central Asia (Statement 'Voice of Central Asia' 2021).

It is in macro-regional frameworks that one would have to look for traces of the institutionalisation of environmentalism. Perhaps not surprisingly, it is the EAEU that, in its treaty, contains most of the references made to the necessity to preserve the environment, thus signalling a rising awareness from the mid-2010s onward of the need to take into account the progressive importance of environmentalism as a norm (EEU Treaty 2015). The treaty contains the term 'environment*' 32 times, of which only 7 occurrences refer to the 'business' or 'investment' environment.² In regard to other Russia-led initiatives, the Charter of the Commonwealth of Independent States identifies 'the environment' as an area of cooperation in Articles 4 and 19, whereas nothing is mentioned in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation charter.

Almost specular to the CAREC initiative, is the environmental regionalism promoted by China³ through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which addresses climate change and environmental stewardship by 'encouraging efficient regional cooperation in such areas as [...] environment protection' (Art. 1) (SCO Charter 2002). The SCO's framework seems to be the most developed and structured process to address the effects of climate change in the region within its Program of Multilateral Trade and Economic Cooperation and, more importantly, in the SCO Development Strategy 2015–2025, which establishes an explicit link between economic growth and environmental protection.

In the context of the UN-sponsored World Environment Day in 2020, the SCO Secretary-General, Vladimir Norov, reaffirmed the centrality of environmental protection to the SCO cooperation agenda, declaring that 'environmental issues have become one of the main components of economic models for the development of States, including the SCO member states, which have reached to concrete understandings on them' (Agostinis and Urdinez 2021). In this regard, China has been proactive in not simply fostering environmental discourses, norms and strategies with SCO countries (including Central Asia), but also playing a role in rebuilding the Central Asian Power System through the Moinak Hydroelectric Power Plant in south-eastern Kazakhstan and the Nurek Hydropower Plant in Tajikistan with financial support from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the World Bank, thus promoting an agenda based on the development of green energy.

This shows that, despite the lack of local, indigenous initiatives coming directly from Central Asian states, one can observe that the region is willing to be involved in a broader, transregional polyarchic network of donors, investors, states and companies that is advancing an environmental agenda in the region. In the case of the SCO and China, it is also important to stress the way that environmental norms are not detached from interest-based and geopolitical considerations, especially if the promotion of these norms helps China to advance its agenda in Central Asia

² https://www.un.org/en/ga/sixth/70/docs/treaty_on_eeu.pdf.

³ China is the world's largest energy consumer and emitter of CO₂. At the same time, in the quest to diversify and de-carbonize its energy matrix, China has become the world leading investor in renewable energies (Agostinis and Urdinez 2021).

and the Central Asian leaders can extract rents from green projects. Whether or not you consider ‘environmentalism’ to be a ‘liberal’ norm, the above shows that non-democratic states and ‘illiberal ecologies’ can also embrace green agendas and foster the institutionalisation of environmentalism.

4 The Domestic Level

The last step in discussing the institutionalisation of environmentalism in Central Asia is to look at the domestic level to see whether the principles enunciated and affirmed internationally and regionally find concrete or at least aspirational (legal and practical) application within the domestic realm of the region’s states. This will hopefully provide an initial sense of the extent to which an institution developed mostly at the international level is trickling down within states, thus changing their normative landscape and hence behaviour.

Here my analysis takes into consideration the following parameters: (1) the presence of a Ministry of Environment/Ecology/Climate; (2) the inclusion of references to environmental protection in national constitutions; (3) whether there are national documents/programmes addressing climate change and the current environmental crisis; (4) whether references to the environment are included in foreign policy documents; and (5) the climate performance of each state according to data provided by the Environmental Performance Index (EPI).⁴ This index uses 32 performance indicators across 11 issue categories, to rank 180 countries on environmental health and ecosystem vitality (highest value 82.5; lowest value 22.6). The EPI ‘offers a scorecard that highlights leaders and laggards in environmental performance and provides practical guidance for countries that aspire to move toward a sustainable future’ (EPI, n.d.).

The above reveals, first of all, that all Central Asian states are working towards the creation of an infrastructure of agencies, documents and bodies to be tasked with addressing, not just the political and economic, but also the methodological and epistemological aspects of environmentalism (that is to say, there is a push for the formation of epistemic communities in Central Asia tasked with studying climate change and its impact on the region).

Second, all Central Asian states were already aware of the importance of protecting the environment in the early 1990s, as demonstrated by the insertion of environmental priorities in their constitutions. This is indeed a nice parallel with the international dimension, which showed that, even at the onset of independence, their representatives were addressing international forums to ‘sensitise’ the international community on green matters and the necessity for financial and technical help. Linked to this, there is the almost uniform presence of ‘green principles’ in the foreign policy documents of Central Asian states, with the exception of Uzbekistan. This shows that

⁴ For a detailed outline of the database’s methodology, see <https://epi.yale.edu/downloads>.

‘environmentalism’ has indeed acquired the status of an institution of international society, as the link between the state as an actor and environmental stewardship as a principle is thereby emphasised in dealings with other members of the international community.

Third, every Central Asian country now has a dedicated body to address environmental issues, although these vary in terms of capacity, budget, and dependency on political power and the broader web of interests within the countries. For example, the minister of Ecology of Kazakhstan, Brekeshev Serikkali Amangaliuly, has previously worked in the oil and gas sector, which should not detract from his commitment to diversification and greening of the economy, but rather shows how it is difficult for these countries to create a new class of environmentally conscious citizens and public servants given the heavily carbon-based background.

Fourth and lastly, while all Central Asian states are placed at the bottom of the EPI ranking, three of them have shown improvements—Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The attentive reader will notice that these are the three countries of the region that are rich in hydrocarbons, and therefore countries where reforms and green plans are more visible. Yet, they are also the three richest countries in the region. As Weinthal observed twenty years ago, in Central Asia ‘[Climate change] is no longer just a technical problem; it is now also a political one that ultimately links issues of environmental scarcity and degradation with the political, economic, and social challenges inherent in the transition from communist rule’ (2002, 7).

5 Findings, Recommendations and Conclusions

This chapter intended to provide an answer to the question, ‘Has environmentalism been institutionalised in Central Asia?’ In light of the three-part analysis offered above (international, regional and domestic levels of analysis) the answer is ‘yes’, although of course, like many things in politics and international relations, this ‘yes’ hides several tensions, nuances and contradictions.

The first important finding of this chapter is that environmental stewardship in Central Asia is being institutionalised in parallel with a process of adaptation to the Western liberal order and its normative and financial architecture. Given that the conditions post-independence in Central Asia were not ideal for environmentalism, it is understandable that the pace and depth of environmentalism is more pronounced at the discursive level as opposed to on the practical policy level. Yet, what should be seen as a sign of positive compliance with environmental discourses, norms and practices is that the difficulties in adapting the environmental agenda are not a matter of ideology, but rather a matter of capacity. What matters is the lack of funds and infrastructures, as well as a clear plan to devise single payments and compensation for policy shifts to address climate change and environmental crises. In Central Asia, there is an absence of developmentalist narratives and of normative or ideological opposition to environmental stewardship.

The second important finding is that the Central Asian states, when cooperating on environmental matters, seem to act as a region in the international realm, but less so within the region itself. This may be explained by their different strategies and tactics, different needs and different institutional preferences. As the regional analysis showed, this means that the logic of institutionalisation of environmentalism has a strong component of *calculation* as opposed to pure belief. That is, environmentalism needs to be ‘talked about’ because of its reputation, the need to attract funds, and to ensure minimal compliance with global environmental standards, but without encroaching on other fundamental institutions such as sovereignty or human rights, and with a limited impact on the economy. The consequence of this is that, while there are elements of centralised cooperation on environmental matters in Central Asia (mostly though Chinese actions within the SCO framework) and liberal approaches to climate-change policies, such as inviting international financial institutions and donors, what we observe in Central Asia is a form of middle-ground or ‘induced’ cooperation based on isolated payments and investments, the role of third parties and regional consultation.

In light of this, by means of a conclusion, two recommendations can be offered to policymakers and stakeholders. The first one is that engagement, dialogue, support and help to Central Asia should continue in technological, scientific, epistemic, infrastructure and financial terms. The analysis above clearly demonstrates that there is awareness, willingness and a need to embrace environmentalism and climate-change related action. The second recommendation is that this support may not necessarily find the best application if framed along exclusively regional lines. While a region-wide approach is important to stress the transnational nature of climate change and environmental degradation, the different challenges, resources, human capital and social contracts in the region lead to differences in complexity of policy design, project feasibility and social priorities. Environmentalism is being institutionalised in Central Asia. The challenge now is for it to move from the sphere of calculation and state financial needs to the realm of belief and moral principle for the benefit of states *and peoples*.

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