Decolonial Central Asia, or a post-liberal one?

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Timur Dadabaev's *Decolonizing Central Asian International Relations* is an innovative piece of work in two ways. First, it represents an attempt to think in a decolonial manner about the practices of international relations in Central Asia, pointing to a distinct way of *doing* world politics in this region. It attributes an equal agency to Central Asian states, with a focus on Uzbekistan, and some of their major international partners, such as Russia, China, Japan and South Korea. It explains rationalities on both sides of interactions, without seeing Central Asia merely as an object of interest of major powers. Second, the book engages with the discipline of International Relations (IR) of Central Asia from a decolonial perspective – as new a way of *thinking* about world politics in the scholarly community. This, on its own, is a brave move because decolonial theory is generally sceptical about states. By assuming that there can be no space for genuine political decoloniality at the state level, it tends to focus on social movements and grassroot initiatives. This is, however, not Dadabaev's case.

The two decolonizing attempts that the book undertakes are related to two different ways of understanding coloniality. When it comes to the way in which international relations are enacted, coloniality can be found for instance in the assertion of neoliberal global capitalism and the security agenda. In the case of Central Asia, we can see this in the motivation behind the interest of some major powers engaging with this region. Looking not only at China's and Russia's, but also Japan's and South Korea's collaboration with Uzbekistan, the book clearly shows that economic interests drive aid, loans and investment. There are also implicit and explicit security connotations in this engagement, related for example to the threat of Islamic fundamentalism and drug trafficking, as well as the proximity of Afghanistan and the fear of a potential global insecurity spill over from that country (Chapter 5). However, Dadabaev also shows how Uzbekistan is actively trying to redirect and equalize these partnerships by gradually shifting the focus of cooperation towards connectivity and transportation.

Another part where some degree of decoloniality can be found in the practice of international relations in the region concerns a distinct mode of behaviour by the Central Asian states in the international arena. Their unique actorness in world politics manifests itself in how they exercise sovereignty, communicate with other states and international organizations, and engage in partnerships. Dadabaev argues that we can see an alternative way of doing international relations in the emergence of informal consultations among heads of states, and in the accumulation of power in hands of political elders. Another feature which distinguishes international relations in this region is the ambiguity in communication between

Central Asian leaders and major partners, which allows them not to accept international norms which do not please them, without rejecting them directly (p. 22).

There are also several practical mechanisms "invented" in Central Asia, which, as the book argues, at the same time reveal decolonial actorness in international politics. One such tool is roadmaps, which under president Mirziyoev became a blueprint of Uzbekistan's bilateral cooperation with its international partners. Roadmaps are portfolios composed of presidential decrees, as well as appendices, classified by themes (energy, education, agriculture etc.), comprising intergovernmental and non-state agreements, and listing funding sources and responsible actors. Dadabaev sees roadmaps as a feature of this country's foreign policy-making, and also of what he defines as Uzbekistan's "developmental state model" (p. 127). This is because roadmaps reflect a new economic model in which the state plays a regulatory role and creates an investor-friendly climate (p. 109), but does not dictate to industries what they should do (p. 107).

Decolonizing Central Asian International Relations is a refreshing read because by exploring the agency of states in the region it avoids two common traps: the transition lens and a tendency to black box states under "illiberal" or "authoritarian" labels. At the same time, I wonder whether the norms, practices and mechanisms which the book presents as decolonial could be captured more accurately through the post-liberal label[1] because they do not exist outside the current international system. They reveal simultaneous processes of acceptance, contestation and re-appropriation of the current world order, whereby the liberal order remains their reference point. For example, by creating roadmaps, Uzbekistan does not aim to challenge the Westphalian, state-centric system, but simply navigates it and adapts to it, to make it more comfortable for itself. Thus, Uzbekistan's developmental state model represents a local variation of the neoliberal governance and the capitalist system, rather than an attempt to create an alternative to this system.

In a similar vein, Dadabaev identifies decoloniality in norms concerning Central Asian neighbourhood, which, as he argues, influence the way governments in the region relate to each other. The norms that the book points to are brotherhood, dignity and the sole concept of neighbourhood – all of which denote thinking in terms of collective, rather than individual interests (Chapter 2). As an example when neigbourhood norms became visible, the book refers to the attempts of Uzbekistan's government to build COVID-19 hospitals in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan during the pandemic (p. 25). Indeed, it is undeniable that the idea of neighbourhood and specific neighbourhood norms, such as solidarity and mutual help, are both part of Central Asian Sufi thinking[2] and are important in navigating everyday life in Central Asia at a micro-level.[3] However, I wonder to what extent this can be applied to

[1] For a discussion on post-liberal statehood in Central Asia, see Philipp Lottholz, *Post-Liberal Statebuilding in Central Asia: Imaginaries, Discourses and Practices of Social Ordering*. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022.
[2] For a discussion on the concept of "hamsoya", sharing the shadow, see Nargis Nurulla-Khojaeva, "Dekolonizatsiya politicheskoy granitsy v Tsentral'noy Azii" [Decolonization of the Political Border in Central Asia], *Vestnik MGIMO-Universiteta* 6, no. (2017): 87-101.
[3] For instance in solving inter-ethnic conflicts at the community level. See Khushbakht Hojiev and Anna Kreikemeyer. *"'Everyday Peace' in Jabbor Rasulov, Tajikistan: Local Social Order and Possibilities for a Local Turn in Peace Building*', in *Interrogating Illiberal Peace in Eurasia*, eds. Catherine Owen, Shairbek Juraev, David Lewis, Nick Megoran, John Heathershaw. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, 121-144.

international relations. An act of building hospitals, which from a decolonial perspective reflects neighbourhood norms, can also aim at increasing prestige, internally and externally, of the state which is in a position to help neighbours. From a post-liberal perspective, this is about power, authority and exercising of state-centric sovereignty. Can we separate these genuine and strategic motives, both in practice and theoretically?

Apart from the practice of doing international politics, the second way in which the book defines coloniality concerns epistemological colonisation in the discipline of IR. Thus, Dadabaev describes the representation of Central Asia in IR as a "double colonial construct" (p. 152). In Soviet times, it was determined by Marxism-Leninism, which is also part of Western modernity and framed the analysis around class struggles. After 1991, in turn, it became influenced by liberal Western frames, either positivist or constructivist, both operating with notions of states and sovereignty. Dadabaev raises a fundamental question about the possibility of decolonizing Central Asian IR through development of a local IR theory, that he calls "indigenous" (p. 4).

It is a great pity that the book does not elaborate in more detail on how the author foresees such local IR, if at all. Would it refer to a theoretical approach, a new epistemic frame to analyse world politics, which would be outside of Soviet and Western liberal influences? If so, should we imagine one common Central Asian IR, or rather five separate, "national" IR frames? Or would local IR perhaps denote a new, distinct epistemic community composed of local scholars? In this case, should this IR be created by researchers from Central Asia who are based there, or could it also include those coming from the region but working in Western academia(s), which makes them inevitably embedded in Western cognitive frames?

Besides these conceptual questions concerning the outlook of Central Asian IR, based on my own experience of working in an IR department in one of Tajikistan's universities, I also wonder about two practical implications. First, is it feasible to think about an emergence of local IR in the specific political context, where IR scholars are tasked not only with analysing current international affairs, but also simultaneously representing and advancing national interests? And secondly, what if the dominant IR frame used by local scholars working in their home country, and who have not had a Western education or collaborations in the West and do not read English-language IR literature or its translations, is as a matter of fact incredibly realist in its preoccupation with rivalry, domination, spheres of influence and the divide-and-conquer logic? Can we call it decolonial? My understanding would be that we are confronted with an IR approach which is, again, post-liberal: it is reactionist to the current neoliberal, capitalist and geo-politicized world order, even if this happens implicitly and perhaps undeliberately.

I wonder what Dadabaev's reading of these issues would be. Let us hope for a continuation of his innovative and thought-provoking *Decolonizing Central Asian International Relations.*