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**Sally N. Cummings. *Understanding Central Asia: Politics and Contested Transformations*.
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Ever since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central Asia—encompassing the states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—has become one of the emblematic features of the post-Cold War geography of international relations. From the relative shelter and seclusion of a Soviet backwater, the Central Asian states found themselves very quickly propelled back into the thick of geopolitics. As a result, the post-Soviet trajectories of the individual Central Asian republics have perplexed a number of observers. There are many reasons for this confusion. On the one hand, with few exceptions, the Central Asian republics continue to be ruled by individuals who were part of the former Soviet elite. On the other hand, the so-called post-communist transition of the Central Asian countries has defied any of the frameworks for explanation and understanding dominating the literature on the topic. At the same time, political, social, and economic life in the region has been pervaded by resilient patronage networks that cross ethnic, socio-economic, and state boundaries.

Not surprisingly, therefore, since the 1990's, the region came to symbolize the pervasive uncertainty of global life, defined by asymmetric conflicts, new forms of authoritarianism, weak statehood, and growing international competition for the rich energy reserves of the region. All of these seem to have pivoted on the fragile and unpredictable nature of Central Asian statehood: "It is not entirely as yet post-Soviet, with traces of this past era remaining infused in patterns of governing and state imaginations, [and yet] the state has changed [and] has been forced to loosen its grip on society even in the most authoritarian of regimes" (p. 180). In this respect, the region has become an idiom, an intervening variable, and an enabling environment for the confrontation with the complexity of post-Cold War international life.

It is this Central Asian confrontation with the diverse dynamics of globalization that animates Sally N. Cummings' examination of the region's complex political, economic, and security challenges. Cummings has already produced a substantial oeuvre on different aspects of Central Asian affairs. In this setting, *Understanding Central Asia* not only offers a thoughtful analysis of the difficult issues facing the region, but it also further demonstrates that Cummings is one of the few commentators with a comfortable grasp on the past, present, and prospective trajectories of Central Asia's transformations as well as the region's positioning on the international stage. In particular, the book offers an incisive yet accessible account of the key economic, political, and security trends impacting each Central Asian state. The point of departure for Cummings' investigation is the diverse political associations that the Central Asian appellation has engendered.

In particular, outlining the contours of the region's symbolic geography tends not to follow the cartographic representation of the post-Soviet entities that currently populate the territory of Central Asia. Instead, its framing exposes particular strategic connotations that the region has acquired in the geopolitical imaginations of different external observers and international actors. In the post-Soviet period, this tension between the perception and substance of Central Asia resulted in further definitional complications that reinforced the fuzziness of the functional and analytical approaches to regional patterns. Thus, Central Asian states tend to be defined either by their perceived common culture—(usually perceived to be "backward," "violent," and "fatalistic") or by their protracted history of imperial rule. This tortuous legacy appears embedded in the very fabric of the newly independent states that emerged in the wake of Soviet dissolution.

In order to unpack the panoply of meanings and connotations underpinning these associations, Cummings has exposed the key aspects of the region's engagement with the history and practice of world affairs. As a result of her thoughtful investigation, she identifies five distinct (yet interrelated) themes key to the understanding of Central Asia: (i) the experience and legacy of the region's past; (ii) the region's culture, beliefs, and identity; (iii) the evolution and, especially, the modalities of the region's political structures and forms of governance; (iv) the economic transformations of the region; and (v) the strategic and security dynamics of the region. By elaborating the idiosyncratic processes animating each of these five themes, Cummings provides one of the most detailed and comprehensive accounts to date of Central Asian affairs. In particular, such an approach allows Cummings to uncover one of the most poignant features of the region's disputed positioning in global politics—the fact that “Central Asia refuses to be neatly compartmentalized.” She explains:

The primary paradox driving Central Asia's existence is that it is both central and isolated. It has both elusive borders and an elusive core, the former being responsible to some extent for the latter. Boundaries are created in reference to both ‘out’ and ‘in’ and in both cases neither is readily identifiable.... Central Asia as a meta-geographical construct can be highly contingent, serving a particular purpose (e.g. aid policy or political mobilization) at particular moment – and with often quite different implications. (p. 31)

Such cogent assessments bare the outlines of the various geopolitical imaginations inscribed in the contested ramifications of the region and its inhabitants. As a result, Cummings' detailed study of Central Asian trends offers a rare, prescient parallel assessment of the complex interaction between the external dynamics on the world stage and the local patterns of development. Her analysis demonstrates that “in the international pecking order, Central Asian states remain largely consumers rather than producers of international relations” (p. 178). Yet, this does not mean that they are passive recipients of international dictate. On the contrary, unlike during the “great games” of yore (during which the concerns of the Central Asian region went largely unrecognized while the major players duked it out), the five Central Asian states have managed quite successfully (of course, to different degrees—largely out of their own choosing) to carve an independent international agency of their own. In this respect, either because of the profligacy of international actors interested in gaining a piece of the hydrocarbon pie of the region, or because of the disappearance of empires, Central Asian states have quite a lot of room to engage in balancing, pick-and-choose, and bandwagoning behavior.

In this respect, the investigative journey of the volume offers a careful and considerate interrogation of the construction and individualization of Central Asia in world politics. In fact, it will make an excellent undergraduate textbook for the study of Central Asian affairs. Cummings' book offers a persuasive interpretation of the post-Soviet trajectories of Central Asia. It also provides a thought-provoking contextual examination of the multiple and often contradictory processes underpinning the security, economic, and political trends of the region. It is expected therefore that Cummings' investigation would be welcomed not only by students of Central Asia and its social, political, and economic dynamics but also by all those interested in the comparative politics and international affairs of the post-Soviet space.

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