

## AREA STUDIES: NATURE AND SCOPE

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### Abstract

*The paper briefly describes the nature and scope of the Area Studies. It highlights the relationship between Area Studies and other traditional disciplines of social sciences, humanities and arts. The “multidisciplinary lens” is essential for Area Studies because no single academic discipline is capable of capturing and conveying a full understanding of another nation, or society or culture’s Social Mechanisms. The Social Mechanisms comprising Structure and Super-structure can be political, legal, economic, educational, religious and anthropological etc., are study objects of various disciplines/sciences. These are interrelated systems and therefore are interdisciplinary. As these Social Mechanisms involve human beings/societies which in turn are objects of Area Studies and therefore Area Studies are multidisciplinary as well interdisciplinary. Various academic theories have been developed by human beings for the welfare of human beings. Area Studies own all academic theories because it provides the study object i.e. human beings/society, for the application of theories and therefore could not have its own specific theory or theories.*

*The paper also argues that the research approach and angle of study in Area Studies varies from country to country as per their national interests and bilateral relations. Area Studies need to build bridges between the disciplines of Area Studies and other departments or traditional disciplines in order to strengthen their disciplinary basis as well as interdependence. It is imperative because Area Studies are needed for disciplines as much as disciplines are needed for Area Studies.*

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## Introduction

This particular paper briefly describes the nature, scope and extent of the discipline of Area Studies and its relationship with other academic disciplines. Area Studies refers to a methodical and scientific study of a nation or society of a defined or specific geographical space. Area Studies have been planned as a unit to meet requirements of understanding all aspects of life in a specific region/area.<sup>1</sup> The term can be generally applied to the comprehensive study of a single national territory/area or region such as Australian studies, American studies, Russian studies etc., while can also be applied to any study of a bi-national or multi-national region/area like Central Asian studies, South Asian studies, European studies etc. Area Studies has been defined as a scientific study of a particular region in order to understand as well as explain the region's place and role in international society and this can only be achieved by the methodical use of all branches of study that may provide valid explanations.<sup>2</sup> The descriptive and empirical contents of Area Study programmes vary widely and therefore programmes of Area Studies i.e. Scheme of Studies are in essence multidisciplinary – in more than two academic disciplines - as well as interdisciplinary because they combine or integrate two or more traditional academic disciplines at times.<sup>3</sup> According to Alan Tansman, Area Studies is a form of translation, analyses and interpretation of foreign cultures/societies through a multidisciplinary lens in order to know and understand them.<sup>4</sup> Area Studies in fact is an integrated, multidisciplinary coverage of an area while maintaining ground in a traditional discipline.<sup>5</sup> For instance at Area Study Centre for Russia, China and Central Asia, University of Peshawar, which runs MPhil and PhD programmes, a scholar having done Master in

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<sup>1</sup> John N. Hazard, "Law and Area Study Programs", *International Social Science Bulletin*, IV(4), (1952). Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0005/000596/059694eo.pdf>, accessed 17/9/2018

<sup>2</sup> Jean B. Duroselle, "Area Studies: Problem of Methods" *International Social Science Bulletin*, IV(4), (1952). Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0005/000596/059694eo.pdf>, accessed 17/9/2018

<sup>3</sup> As quoted by David L. Szanton, "The Origin, Nature, and Challenges of Area Studies in the United States", in David L. Szanton, ed., *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, vol. 3, (University of California, Berkley, 2003)

<sup>4</sup> David L. Szanton, op. cited.

<sup>5</sup> David L. Szanton, "The Origin, Nature, and Challenges of Area Studies in the United States", in David L. Szanton, ed., *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, vol. 3, (University of California, Berkley, 2003)

Economics has to conduct MPhil research in Economy or any aspect of the Economy of either Central Asian Republics or Russia or China after successfully completing the coursework. As the subject area is almost alien to the newly inducted MPhil and PhD scholars therefore the coursework at the Centre, comprising two semesters, is just like an introduction to the subject area through the lenses of multiple disciplines. The important factor which needs to be taken care of in Area Studies is that, for instance, a scholar having Master or equivalent degree in Law admitted to a Central Asian Study Centre for MPhil, must study courses on legal system and constitutional development in Central Asia along with other courses during the coursework. Same should be the regulation during coursework for scholars of other disciplines of social sciences acquiring higher education in Area Studies.

Area Studies is also said to be primarily an effort to make the meanings, assumptions, structure and socio-economic and political dynamics of another nation or society comprehensible to an outsider. However Area Studies at the same time provides opportunities to expand the outsider's knowledge and understanding of his/her own nation/society through analytical and comparative studies. For example a Central Asian studies scholar comparing Pakistan-Uzbekistan Cotton Sectors, he/she has to understand and know both Pakistan's as well as Uzbekistan's cotton sectors and then he/she will be able to compare/contrast both to find out fields of mutual interests and mutual cooperation regarding agriculture/cotton sectors. I stress here fields of mutual interests because we study Central Asia here in Pakistan from Pakistan's perspective.

### **Historical Background, Evolving Nature and Scope**

Historically, Area Studies have their origin in the Eighteenth Century when the European powers started colonizing areas and started studying their languages, culture and social and political organisations.<sup>6</sup> This academic effort was mainly driven by commercial as well political interests of the European Powers. During the succeeding century i.e., Nineteenth Century, the European Universities witnessed the establishment of Area Studies as a colonial study.<sup>7</sup> However, the School of Slavonic Studies and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) were the first formal institutions established in London in 1915 and 1916 respectively as Area

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<sup>6</sup> Bert Hoffmann and Andreas Mehler, "Area Studies", *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/area-studies> accessed 17/09/2018

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

Studies institutions.<sup>8</sup> Likewise Area Studies were established and developed in the first half of the Twentieth Century in the United States. Therefore, UK, USA and other European States have developed much strength in Area Studies and have tried well to understand rest of the World.<sup>9</sup>

Area Studies were established, organized and developed as multi-disciplinary as well as interdisciplinary academic fields and therefore were placed on University Campuses to have close academic interaction between Area Studies and other traditional disciplines. An 'Area' cannot be studied, covered and understand fully through the prism and lenses of a single academic discipline. The traditional disciplines are nothing but they are different channels of knowledge. At an Area Study Centre, one has to study the subject Areas' historical background (History), economy (Economics), political system/s (Political Science), foreign policy/relations (International Relations), Geography, Sociology, Anthropology, conflicts and mechanisms of its resolution (Conflict Resolution), legal system/s (Law) language and literature in a particular language (English, Pashto, Russian, Chinese) etc. Area Studies, due to its multi-disciplinary nature, therefore, encompasses all academic disciplines particularly in social sciences, arts and humanities and organisation of Area Studies is required to be structured according to its nature. The courses of Area Studies are, therefore, designed on the basis of multiple disciplines. According to Lesley Pitman "there is almost no limit on the disciplines included in Area Studies apart from pure and applied sciences, and even they could be included in their historical and cultural aspects".<sup>10</sup>

Area Studies may help in upgrading and reconstructing an academic discipline by providing new material and new ideas to become an inclusive and more effective tool for socio-political, economic, ideological and cultural analysis and interpretations. Due to the diverse disciplinary bases and the determined evolution of the field, Area Studies scholars have been developing and legitimizing new understandings and forms of knowledge which academics in the social sciences and humanities are less likely to have imagined, and for understandable reasons. Historically, Area Studies have been producing new data, new ideas, new methods to key issues, and new units of enquiry, and have legitimized the intrinsic and analytic value of the perspectives of the "native" or the "other," and have been generating more

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<sup>8</sup> Lesley Pitman, *Supporting Research in Area Studies: A Guide for Academic Libraries*, (Chandos Publishing: Oxford Press, 2015). Retrieved from [http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1469352/2/area\\_studies\\_book\\_final\\_author%27s\\_text\\_UCL\\_template.pdf](http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1469352/2/area_studies_book_final_author%27s_text_UCL_template.pdf), accessed 17/9/2018

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

culturally rooted understandings and descriptions. By creating new types of multi-disciplinary academic units, Area Study Centre for Russia, China and Central Asia, University of Peshawar, for instance, has intellectually and academically transformed the University of Peshawar to a great extent in the realm of social Sciences, arts and humanities. Area Study Centre, University of Peshawar has produced 83 PhDs and 29 MPhil scholars since its establishment under the Parliament Act XLV in 1975. Initially the Centre was assigned the Area of Central Asia for research purposes, however the Government of Pakistan later on added Russia and China also to the Area of research. Other five Area Study Centres established under the parliament Act in Pakistan include: Area Study Centre for Americas, Quaid-e-Azam University Islamabad, Area Study Centre for South Asia, University of Punjab, Lahore, Area Study Centre for Europe, University of Karachi, Area Study Centre for Far East and Southeast Asia, University of Sindh, Jamshoro and Area Study Centre for Middle East and Arab, University of Baluchistan, Quetta.

Generally it is said that Area Studies has no theories of its own. Let me explain that why Area Studies could not develop its own theories? Various academic theories have been developed by humans for the purpose of general welfare of human beings. This purpose will be achieved only through the application of these theories to the society/humans. Area Studies owns all academic theories because it provides the study object i.e. human beings/society, for the application of different and various academic theories and therefore could not have its own specific theory or theories. In other words Area Studies has as much theories as much disciplines are there in the realm of humanities, arts and social sciences. Area Studies give their practitioners better understanding of the phenomenon or theory they discuss through its application to a particular area/society.<sup>11</sup> The former Soviet Central Asia or former Soviet Union at large served as a laboratory to experiment different political, social and economic academic theories. It provides empirical study of communism as a political, social and economic system where different theories of social sciences were applied on the society. Area Studies verifies that there is always gap between theory and practice. When the theory of Karl Marx (Communism) was applied to the society in former Soviet space it could not produce a pure classless society (one of the main features of the theory) where the Chairmen of Collective Farms, Directors of State Farms and Governors of various regions enjoyed

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<sup>11</sup> Kenneth J. Grieb, "Area Studies and the Traditional Disciplines" *The History Teacher*, 7(2) (Society for History Education, Feb., 1974), 228-238. Retrieved from [http://home.sogang.ac.kr/sites/kylee/Courses/Lists/b6/Attachments/14/Area%20Studies%20and%20the%20Traditional%20Disciplines%20\(1974\).pdf](http://home.sogang.ac.kr/sites/kylee/Courses/Lists/b6/Attachments/14/Area%20Studies%20and%20the%20Traditional%20Disciplines%20(1974).pdf), accessed 17/9/2018

better life than the workers. Similarly the theory of Adam Smith (Capitalism and Invisible Hand) i.e., no government intervention in economic affairs of state is unworkable in practice as proved by the Great Depression during the first half of the twentieth century, Asian financial crises of 1998 and global financial crises during 2008-09. The governments had to intervene to regulate their economies. In other words Area Studies provides opportunities to denote and address the deficiencies in theories through empirical research and application. It is also evident from China's modification of communism and socialism. China had started modifications in the theory of communism by as early as 1970 while former Soviet Union could not identify and address the deficiencies in the theory of communism.

The former Soviet States also provide the ideal laboratory for structured and focused analyses of their trajectories of post communist development. The proliferation of new topics has led to a much broader integration of post-Soviet study into the dominant theoretical concerns of the social science disciplines in the developed world. A significantly larger proportion of research articles in area as well as in disciplinary journals have been focusing and devoted to Area Studies of former Soviet states i.e. to analyse and conceptualize the transitional changes in the post-Communist era. Many published works during the 1990s focused on the ways these countries were dealing with the challenges of political transition i.e. democratizing their polities, economic transition from communism to capitalism i.e. marketizing their economies, and integrating into the international economic and political order. Significant research work has also been done and published on issues and matters related to state-building and nation-building, demilitarization, and transformation as well as diversification of foreign relations.<sup>12</sup> Besides historical, interpretive, descriptive, comparative, analytical and empirical research tools, tools of academic theory are essential part of training at Area Studies now. Area Studies scholars now conduct their research on the basis of theoretical frame work (theory) grounded in a traditional discipline.

Why or how Area Studies are interdisciplinary? The Social Mechanisms, i.e., Structure (base) and Super-structure, can be political, legal, economic, educational, religious, anthropological etc., are study objects of various disciplines/sciences and are interrelated systems, therefore interdisciplinary. As these Social Mechanisms involve human beings/societies which in turn

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<sup>12</sup> Victoria E. Bonnell and George Breslauer, "Soviet and Post-Soviet Area Studies" in David L. Szanton, ed., *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, Volume 3, (University of California, Berkley, 2003). Retrieved from <http://repositories.cdlib.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1029&context=uciaspubs/editedvolumes>

are study objects of Area Studies and therefore multidisciplinary as well. Further Area Studies Programmes can be distinguished from traditional applied programmes of the types such as Political Science, or Economics because the primary objective of such programmes is typically to train students in the concepts and methods of a single discipline, while giving particular emphasis to the theories of that particular discipline. Importantly Area Studies as interdisciplinary research requires more a 'discipline' than a 'disciplinary' research.<sup>13</sup> For instance while studying economy of Central Asia, other auxiliary disciplines like geography, political science, law, anthropology etc., will help and cooperate but will subordinate their specific interests to the dominant discipline i.e. economics. Thus according to Hans J. Morgenthau it is the discipline of economics in this case which determines the common object of intellectual curiosity and call in other disciplines for assistance.<sup>14</sup> Integration requires a hierarchy of interests in which one interest has a function of integrating the others as mentioned above.

The principal objective of Area Studies Programmes on the other hand, is to study the area holistically, using whichever disciplinary or interdisciplinary approaches are most appropriate to understand the specific aspect of the area on which the scholars desire to concentrate. For example geopolitics of Central Asia refers to the analyses of geography, history, economics and other social sciences to understand the methods and tactics used by regional and extra regional states to formulate and apply their policies. It is also worth mentioning that there can be no institutional division between disciplines and area studies because disciplines are needed for area studies as much as area studies are needed for disciplines. It is obvious from the fact that, for instance, considerable work on the economies of China, Pakistan etc., have been embedded in the 'disciplinary economics department' of the University and similarly works on Constitutions of Russia, America etc., have been embedded in the discipline of Law. This is because of understanding the theories for their own sake as well as in the interest of comparative considerations<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, "Area Studies and the Studies of International Relations" in *International Social Science Bulletin*, IV(4), (1952). Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0005/000596/059694eo.pdf>, accessed 17/9/2018

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Professor Janet Hunter, as quoted by Roger Goodman and Amanda Berlan, "*The Future of Interdisciplinary Area Studies in the UK*", (Oxford University, 2005). Retrieved from <http://www.area-studies.ox.ac.uk/sites/sias/files/documents/The%20Future%20of%20Interdisciplinary%20Area%20Studies%20in%20the%20UK%20-%20Report%20of%20a%20Workshop%20-%20December%202005.pdf>

Area Studies through interdependence and complementarity of different disciplines therefore comprehends all disciplines in social sciences, arts and humanities. These different academic disciplines are nothing but they are different channels of knowledge. Therefore any discipline of social sciences, arts and humanities, in principle, may be included as a major or minor channel of knowledge in the academic programmes at Area Studies. In practice, programmes tend to be organised either on the basis of various Social Sciences' disciplines or around a combination and formation of arts and humanities and social sciences such as politics, inter-national relations, and economics or politics and history. For example, the phenomena of geo-economics and geo-politics refers to or combine the study of geography, economics, politics, international relations and history. However, there is a wide diversity and the frontiers between these wide-ranging disciplines/branches are extremely permeable. Different spheres of Area Studies have evolved with different customs. Programmes at Area Study Centre (Russia, China and Central Asia) University of Peshawar enroll the students from all the disciplines in social sciences, arts and humanities i.e. literature, history, politics, Legal systems, Economies and International Relations of those societies with each other and with regional and extra regional states, as well as the transnational processes affecting those nations or societies. Programmes have also the peculiarity of giving importance to the study of institutions such as Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO), Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and other international organisations within the region in case of Central Asian Studies. Similarly comparative analysis or understanding can be implicitly or explicitly embedded in the syllabi. However as I mentioned earlier, the scholar at the Centre maintains his/her discipline of Master Level while conducts MPhil and PhD level research.

Professor Eric Herzber of Latin American Studies Program at Simon Fraser University (SFU), British Columbia in Canada said that "9/11 changed the security rational for supporting area studies and this impacts different area studies differently, but if one seeking support to train people to understand Central Asia, it is a significant shift".<sup>16</sup> It means research agendas have expanded further to include post-socialist political and economic transitions, civil society, ethnic resurgence, cultural and religious change, etc. It also reflects on the significance of contemporary Central Asian Republics (CARs), rather than on the history of Central Asia alone. The independent Central Asia or the contemporary Central Asia refers to the

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<sup>16</sup> Eric Hershberg, in a Conference on "Area Studies in the Future of Higher Education" at Indiana University, Bloomington, February 26-28, 2009  
<http://www.indiana.edu/~reeiweb/2009asc/index.shtml>



concept of studying an area that became independent after the collapse of former Soviet Union. Here history is relevant only to an extent that helps in understanding the emergence or making of Central Asia as a region, but the focus of study is the geo-strategic and geo-economic significance of the independent Central Asia. The interpretations and analysis of current political and economic transition in Central Asia and the International Relations of CARs with each other and with regional and extra regional states are important as they have implications on regional and global levels. Moreover, the study and analyses of the 'World Focus' on Central Asia and its impact on Pakistan and the policy options for Pakistan are important from Pakistan's perspective.

Area Studies addresses the basic need of contemporary researchers that is to develop intellectual and practical skills to apply to a given geographical area, to other areas and to comparative analysis in regional context as well as in the global context. The researchers also need to understand and interpret the world of the 'others' and to translate this otherness from various angles for the academic and end-users.<sup>17</sup> This approach, therefore, exceeds traditional disciplinary boundaries. Area Studies scholars, beside, undergoing training to learn and develop general research skills i.e. bibliographic and computing skills, teaching and presentation skills, communication and research design and management skills, they undergo additional training to learn and develop context specific research skills. This category includes learning about culture, political and economic organizations, history, geography and language of the area through direct and indirect exposure. The scholars evaluate, assess, analyse and interpret the data collected from different sources, primary or secondary, published or unpublished, interviews or documents, and theories both methodically and theoretically. It implies that demands in training at Area Studies are heavy, varying and challenging. Essentially the disciplines and methodology in Area Studies have evolved over a period of time through the history as earlier Area Studies were more general and rarely rooted in Social Sciences disciplines. For instance, Russian studies have been subject to changes, the theories and methods included in studying Post-Soviet Russia were inapplicable to the study of the Russia during Soviet era. In the fact the advantage of Area Studies lies in that beside a strong disciplinary basis it imparts understanding of other disciplines and strengthens the multi-disciplinary approach. At the same time it imparts research training to

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<sup>17</sup> Roger Goodman. (ed.). "*The Future of Interdisciplinary Area Studies in the UK*", (Oxford University, 2005), retrieved from. <http://www.area-studies.ox.ac.uk/sites/sias/files/documents/The%20Future%20of%20Interdisciplinary%20Area%20Studies%20in%20the%20UK%20-%20Report%20of%20a%20Workshop%20-%20December%202005.pdf>

understand the application of different concepts, methods and theories developed in Western or Eastern context to other different cultural or political situations/contexts. For instance Communism/Socialism had a different meaning for Soviets and Chinese. Likewise 'Democracy' has a different meaning in Moscow and Washington.

### **Angle of Study**

There are numerous Russian and Central Asian studies institutes around the globe. In all these centers or institutes the current developments in Russia and Central Asia are approached by the specific disciplinary perspective which may be history, political science, economics, sociology and international relations etc. The current world focus on Central Asia has further underlined the importance of research approach by different countries to analyze and understand Central Asia. However the research approach and angle of study varies from country to country as per their national interests and bilateral relations. For instance USA studies Central Asia from one angle while Russia studies it from the other. America concerns with constructing a marketized, liberal democracy that is integrated into global capitalism while Russia focuses on the continuation rather change. We here in Pakistan study Russia, China and Central Asia from Pakistan's perspective i.e. to search Pakistan's relations with the states of Area Concerned through historical perspectives as well as in contemporary era, to find out fields of mutual interests in every field of life, to find out Pakistan's place in markets of these states and to identify major irritants in Pakistan's relations with these states in regional and global context through descriptive, empirical, analytical methods as well as through comparative study by the faculty and through capable scholars offering them MPhil and PhD degrees as carrot. This way a stock of research community/area specialists is also produced for further reproduction

### **Recommendations**

1. Universities need to build bridges between the disciplines of Area Studies and other departments or disciplines in order to show their interdependence. We have to forge pathways between disciplines to develop new theories. For example in UK and USA the focus is shifting from Post Doctoral and PhD research to Master level study in the disciplines of Area Studies. We here in the respective Universities can introduce or include minors and majors on Area Studies in different social science disciplines at Master level through exchange of faculty. Similarly the Area Study Centre University of Peshawar, and Area Study Centre for Africa and Americas,

University of Quad e Azam Islamabad can have a research project or program on American policy towards Central Asia.

2. Most of the Area Study Scholars in Russia, India and a number of countries are placed in the foreign affairs according to their speciality in area. To quote James F. Collins former American Ambassador to Russia, “As Ambassador to the Russian Federation, I found the only way to develop policy or structure my resources was in essence to rely on a series of area study seminars”. I don’t recommend to place area studies faculty as ambassadors but I would definitely recommend close coordination between Area Study Centers and relevant desks in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamabad; There should be annual or biannual meetings between the Area Study Centre and its relevant desk in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on regular basis to discuss the goals of study and set research agendas collectively.

3. Encouraging international seminars, conferences and exchange of scholars needed because these activities play vital role in furthering academic relations and developing mutual understanding and cooperation between the regional states.

4. The scholars at Area Studies need to accomplish their research work remaining specific to his/her discipline under the discipline and area relevant supervisor.

5. As the course work at Area Studies is combined for MPhil and PhD scholars belonging to various disciplines, the courses offered during a particular semester should be selected from a pool of approved courses at the Area Studies on the basis of scholars’ disciplines in that particular semester.

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