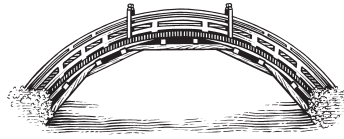


BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

Alexander Cooley's
*Great Games, Local Rules:
The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*

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Alexander Cooley

Central Asia as a Case Study for a Multipolar World

Marlene Laruelle

Alexander Cooley's book *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* is a more than welcome read for at least three reasons. First, at a time when the U.S. media is full of stereotypes on the Great Game being played out around the drawdown from Afghanistan in 2014, this work sheds light on the real mechanisms of balance—or of imbalance—between “great powers” and “small countries.” It questions the conventional wisdom of considering the states of Central Asia as mere victims or pawns caught in the game of great powers, dispossessed of means to exert pressure and devoid of autonomy in their foreign policy choices. As Cooley brilliantly shows, the Central Asian governments have rather succeeded in imposing their rules on the major powers, whether one is talking about Russia, the United States, or China. Bilateral relations in large part operate according to modalities decided by the local governments, not by the major capitals, which have no other choice than to yield to the stipulated rules. The strategies of mimetism developed by the Central Asian states allow them to present the particular face that is desired by their interlocutor. When negotiating with Moscow and Beijing, the Central Asian states do not conceal the authoritarian nature of their decision-making. When meeting with Europeans and the Americans, however, Central Asian leaders display concern for democratization and good governance, emphasizing the process of “transition” toward the norms of the Western market economy and democracy. In so doing, they request more time to be able to integrate the requested changes and show a concern to improve their governance. Central Asian states also reiterate Western preoccupations when it is in their own interests. They point out, for example, their secular legislation and refusal to become Islamic states, in particular when dealing with Israel. At other times, they play the role of countries menaced by the “Afghan threat,” so as to ingratiate themselves with Europe and the United States and obtain Western financing.

Second, the book sheds light on the stark realities underlying negotiations between the major powers and the states of Central Asia. Far from remaining content with a superficial discourse on the foreign policy strategies of each of the actors, Cooley analyzes in-depth the mechanisms that underpin these states' often transactional foreign policies. For example, they engage in tough

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negotiations with Russia and the United States on the price for obtaining military bases. In the case of China, however, Central Asian states make strategic political concessions on issues such as the cession of territory, Uighur secessionism, and the adoption of China's language on the "three evils" in exchange for Chinese investment. For external actors, participation in the logics of the Central Asian elites is inevitable: all of them thus become, willy-nilly, the accomplices of strategies for sending Central Asia's public money offshore. While this situation may not perturb Moscow or Beijing, it is much more problematic for Washington, which has the duty of accountability to its citizens and their representatives. In the end, U.S. policy in the region has a schizophrenic character: on the one hand, it speaks of good governance and rule of law, while on the other, in the name of strategic interests, it is obliged to follow the logic established by the elites in place. Theoretical works such as *Great Games, Local Rules* that go beyond the diplomatic level and take into account the realities of negotiations taking place in the hallways of power can only be beneficial for international relations.

Last, the book illuminates the transformation of international affairs at the beginning of the 21st century. Central Asia is positioned as a test region, a textbook case of the evolutions underway that escape the post-Cold War framework and portend a more complex era. Military and diplomatic power obviously remain important and must not be underestimated, but they are complemented and rivaled by several other aspects of power: soft-power tools, business diplomacy, the capacity to invest huge amounts of funds in the name of "good neighborhood" relations, a diplomacy of fear and threat, and the current institutional complexity, which gives an institution such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation more legitimacy than it has capacity for concrete action. Western powers thus find themselves weakened not only by the rise of the Asian powers but also by the regionalization of international relations, which can suddenly turn a medium-sized power into an extremely powerful driver or spoiler. Central Asia, which is in many respects a peripheral region, has therefore become central on the strategic checkerboard, not because it is the "heartland" of the Great Game, but because it illustrates the new complexity of international affairs.

Some elements that would have given extra grist to Alexander Cooley's already very convincing mill of ideas—elements that I hope will figure in one of the author's future projects—include the following:

1. The question of how public opinion in the countries concerned perceives foreign policy, or more precisely of the intertwining of domestic and international legitimacies, is central to understanding

the strategies toward and within the region. The author rightly evokes Central Asian political legitimacies, but less so those of Russia, China, and the United States, for which nation-branding and control of information also constitute an integral part of the tool kits available.

2. The diversity of actors within the states themselves is also an essential element of explanation. Just as there exists no single U.S. political line, so too there exists no uniform Russian, Turkish, or indeed Chinese policy. Instead, policy changes depend on whether the central bodies of power, regional bodies, military and security actors, or business circles are involved.
3. Cooley's work is too state-centric. Central Asia provides a unique platform for studying the multiplicity of actors on the international stage: private firms, religious actors, and diasporas and migrants are, for example, important elements that change the balance of policymaking both for local governments and for external actors.

In sum, *Great Games, Local Rules* has quickly become essential not only for studies on Central Asia but also for understanding contemporary changes in the international arena. With the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014, the book highlights the possibility of a post-American Central Asia where the United States seems to have no other real strategy than to offer transactional politics to the strategies of other states and let regional powers and local regimes shape the future of the region.

How to Suborn Great Powers

James Sherr

Even if it does nothing else, Alexander Cooley's latest book, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*, will remind us that we are well into the revisionist phase of understanding what did—and more importantly, did not—change in the countries of the former Soviet Union after the end of the Cold War. Let us hope that the mood is contagious. The World Bank, the European Commission, the U.S. Congress, and the “better” business

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consultancies are still well-provisioned with individuals promoting reform with the rectitude of English Whigs promoting enlightenment.

Some ten years ago, Ivan Krastev reflected on the consequences of pretending that “reform has nothing to do with cultures.”¹ As Cooley demonstrates, patrimonialism is not only a culture but a tenacious and adaptable system. The tsarist dispensation was patrimonial as a matter of principle. The Soviet state, between purges and liquidations, was obliged to compromise with local (and often tribal) variants of patrimonialism, and the post-Soviet states of Central Asia are patrimonial to the core. The “who-whom” in these countries is not conservatives versus reformers but networks of patrons and clients that knit society together, as well as divide it. The norms of this world are organic rather than rational, informal rather than public; and its public institutions for the most part are either decorative or captive. Rent-seeking is pervasive, and resources and power are interchangeable. What Vladislav Inozemtsev stated about Russia applies in Central Asia with a vengeance: “what Westerners would call corruption is not the scourge of the system, but the basic principle of its normal functioning.”²

As the title implies, *Great Games, Local Rules* is largely the story of how external powers—very great ones, indeed—have had to accept local rules as the price of presence and access. In the case of Russia, many will find this surprising. As the author notes, “above all, Moscow has sought regional primacy” and “of all the great powers, it easily possesses the most extensive array of regional ties” (p. 51). Even if one excludes the intra-elite and institutional linkages that survived the Soviet dissolution, the Russian Federation has an unequalled array of soft-power resources, notably the remittances provided by the region’s migrants (which account for 49% of Tajikistan’s entire GDP). It is also the only country with a plausible military counter to the region’s destabilization. Just as much as its Soviet predecessor (or any liberal state), contemporary Russia is the bearer of rationalist, integrationist agendas (recently, the Eurasian Union). What Cooley manages to show is that, despite these ambitions and assets, Russia’s agendas have been adulterated, parried, or bent to serve local interests.

Not surprisingly, it is the United States, with its metronomic litany of reforms and rights-driven causes, that has suffered the greatest rebuffs (notably after the Andijan episode of 2005). Yet, in ways that are both edifying and dispiriting, Washington has adapted to realities on the ground, maintaining

¹ Ivan Krastev, *Shifting Obsessions: Three Essays on the Politics of Anticorruption* (New York: Central European University Press, 2004), 30–31.

² Vladislav Inozemtsev, “Neo-Feudalism Explained,” *American Interest*, March/April 2011 ~ <http://www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=939>.

and in some ways expanding the military presence it secured in the wake of September 11. The picture the book presents of the political prerogatives assumed by the Pentagon and U.S. Central Command—utterly disorienting to any product of the British military system—is a story in itself. But, according to Cooley, the “erosion of U.S. credibility... as an exporter of democratic values... and accompanying loss of prestige remains the greatest casualty of Washington’s engagement with the Central Asian regimes” (p. 164). He finds it “doubtful that this steady decline in overall U.S. regional influence will be reversed” in the wake of the Afghanistan withdrawal (p. 164).

Thus far, it is China that has accumulated the biggest prizes. Beijing has broken the Russian energy monopsony, whereby Russia once could buy Turkmenistan’s gas for derisory sums and sell it on the European market at oil-indexed prices. Unlike the European Union, which dithers over gas interconnectors in its own jurisdiction, China has built pipelines and other infrastructure projects to specification and on time. Of the three big players, it has been the least demanding and the most adept. Yet China is not without flaws, and indeed illusions. It too seeks to advance Central Asian integration, not as a good in itself but as a complement to its own regional policy and as a means of diluting Uighur separatism. China might be less intrusive than the United States or Russia, but it is unabashedly self-interested. According to Cooley, “if it fails to sufficiently demonstrate that it is acting for the broader good, and not just as a plunderer of the region’s natural resources and energy,” China risks a regional backlash (p. 166).

That fact serves to remind us that, in addition to local agendas, the countries of Central Asia have national interests. President Nursultan Nazarbayev’s Kazakhstan has perfected the art of keeping external powers engaged and in check. Yet Nazarbayev is not alone in understanding that the alternative to a multivector policy is loss of autonomy and failure. What is missing in this schema is any articulated notion of regional interest, let alone the recognition that, beyond counterterrorism and regime survival, such a thing exists. As Cooley notes, barriers to integration persist not because national governments “lack the necessary technical expertise or capacity, but because elites privately benefit from the region’s enduring system of national regulations and border restrictions” (p. 160). Yet there is more to it than that. Barriers are ingrained in the mentalities of an ethnically and tribally demarcated world. It hardly makes sense to exploit such divisions if one wants to overcome them, yet the architects of the Soviet project set out to do both, oblivious of the essential contradiction between their vision and their methods. With partial success, they integrated Russians into distant lands; through inadvertence as much

as malice, they deepened the alienation of neighbors. Anyone lamenting the absence of integration in Central Asia should first ask what usable heritage the countries of the region possess.

Despite its strictly regional focus, *Great Games, Local Rules* is possibly the most cogent critique of post-Cold War orthodoxy published to date. Yet, invariably, the demolition of one orthodoxy erects another. It is doubtful that Alexander Cooley has such an intention, but the revisionist trend, now encompassing the European ex-Soviet states and the EU-integration project itself, risks becoming an avalanche. Patrimonialism is not only antithetical to the norms of liberal, Western democracy; it is a viable antithesis, as Central Asia demonstrates in a remarkably pure form.

Yet in the European parts of the former Soviet Union, patrimonialism does not exist in a pure form. It is by turns adulterated, modernized, counterbalanced, and opposed by European inheritances, aspirations, and norms of conduct. The Russian Federation has perfected a workable, if unsettling, synthesis between patrimonialism and competitive business practice. There, as in Ukraine, this synthesis is anathema to a growing body of small- and medium-sized entrepreneurs, who not only understand what EU standards are but have an avowed need for them. In these states and a good many others, Western standards and practice have alienated some and been grist to the opportunism of others. But they have also created points of friction within states and begun a process of evolution to which even Kazakhstan might not prove immune. The betrayal of expectations that are largely of our own making has not brought an end to this evolution, let alone history, which has a habit of surprising those who think they understand it.

Winners and Losers of Strategic Games in Central Asia

Mamuka Tsereteli

Alexander Cooley's *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* is a significant contribution to the intellectual exploration of great-power dynamics in Central Asia. Cooley skillfully consolidates scattered knowledge about the experience of the great powers

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and different local actors in Central Asia into a strategic picture of the region that is valuable to both the academic and policymaking communities.

The book's major argument is that three major powers—China, Russia, and the United States—are not involved in a nineteenth-century-style, zero-sum competition but rather are pursuing different individual strategic purposes in Central Asia that have allowed them to co-exist in the region without major confrontation in the last decade. At the same time, Cooley argues that the Central Asian states and their rulers are important actors in their own right. The book demonstrates local political leaders' mastery of balancing the great powers in Central Asia, which has helped them maximize political sovereignty while also securing the survival of their regimes.

The book shows that Moscow, Beijing, and Washington all managed to achieve some balance of their strategic interests in post-September 11 Central Asia. The United States obtained basing rights and strategic access to Afghanistan via the region. Starting from 2008, the United States facilitated the development of the Northern Distribution Network, the supply line for U.S. troops stationed in Afghanistan that transits and benefits several Central Asian states. Russia has kept its southern borders secure and maintained strong economic and political ties with Central Asia. China has limited the spread of radical Islamic influence in its own Uighur-populated Xinjiang region, which neighbors Central Asia, and established itself as a key trade and investment partner for most of the states in the region.

But Cooley's analysis demonstrates that there are still winners and losers in this modern game of great powers. The strategic positions of Russia, the United States, and China in Central Asia are different today from what they were in the pre-September 11 era. First, looking at how the role of Russia has changed, Russia is no longer the sole outside military power accepted by the regional states. The presence of U.S. and other Western troops in Central Asia reflects the strategic retreat of Russia. Russia is also no longer the sole provider of the transit of energy riches from the Caspian basin, with China absorbing significant amounts of hydrocarbons from the region. And Russia is no longer the leading trade partner for the region, replaced in this position by China. Russia has thus clearly lost its strategic position as the dominant political and economic force in Central Asia, a position that it had held for almost two hundred years. Cooley still thinks that Russia holds broad and deep soft power that in the long run gives it a unique advantage over China and the United States and supports its "privileged role" in the region. Russia is the most significant provider of public goods for the region. One substantial element of Russia's soft power is that it is a key source of remittances to Central Asia

from labor migrants, mostly from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. The Customs Union is another soft-power instrument that Moscow pushes to advance its interest. Moreover, the book argues that Russia will return to its position as the security guarantor for the region after withdrawal of the majority of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2014. Russia will face its own limits, however, including its ability to mobilize financial and human resources for a larger security presence in Central Asia. Although Russian limits are not discussed in the book, Cooley indicates that the Kremlin may not have the political will to play this role in the region. Lack of political will by Russia, which is trying to secure its strategic borders, can only be explained by a lack of financial and human resources. Moscow's strategic recovery in Central Asia will be determined by a combination of internal and external developments at work in Russia.

Cooley calls China a "winner on points" in the new Central Asian Great Game. The book demonstrates multiple gains made by China in Central Asia, the majority of them economic. Two facts stand out among other developments in the last five years. The first is that China bypassed Russia as the region's leading trade partner. The second is that three countries in Central Asia (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan) are now connected to China with oil or natural gas pipelines and for the first time in decades have access to a sizable export alternative to the Russian market and transit system. The geopolitical significance of these developments is hard to underestimate.

At the same time, there are factors that the Central Asian states do not welcome in their relationships with China. The two major factors are the inflow of cheap labor accompanying Chinese investments and the trade imbalance, as Central Asia only exports mineral resources, whereas China exports a wide range of manufactured and finished products to the region. While some public opinion surveys demonstrate public discontent with China's growing economic influence,¹ the Central Asian states and their leaders currently enjoy China's greater economic presence in the region and skillfully use it as a balancing factor vis-à-vis the United States and Russia.

U.S. interests in Central Asia during the last decade were determined by the war on terrorism and the large-scale U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. Washington's long-term interests in Central Asia beyond the overall stability and security of the frontline region are less clear. The United States will still

¹ "Central Asia Barometer," M-Vector, October 24, 2012  <http://www.m-vector.com/en/news/?id=290>.

have a military presence in Afghanistan after 2014, but the depth of U.S. interest in Central Asia is more difficult to predict.

Against this backdrop of external great-power interests in Central Asia, Cooley also discusses the role that local elites and leaders play in Great Game power dynamics. Yet such internal political, social, and economic developments are not a major focus of the book. They are significant, however, from the perspective of internal security dynamics and will affect external choices and directions in the years to come. Three interrelated internal issues, in particular, will contribute to the long-term future of the region and thus deserve greater attention. The first is the upcoming leadership transitions in the two largest and most economically and politically influential Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. How these countries manage this process, and whether foreign powers can influence the outcomes, will affect the short- and long-term direction of both domestic and foreign policy in the region. The second issue is demographic trends, such as the growing number of younger citizens with limited educational or employment opportunities, most significantly in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The third is the economic policies, corruption, and poor governance that limit economic growth and the process of job creation. The official statistics grossly underestimate unemployment, and the growing number of unemployed young men will inevitably lead to social and economic conflicts that could easily evolve into security challenges unless addressed by policymakers. The book would gain tremendously by greater reflection on these three issues of internal development and their potential impact on great-power competition in the region.

Overall, in *Great Games, Local Rules*, Cooley manages to combine theories of international relations with empirical data about the interaction between great powers and local actors in Central Asia. He thus lays the groundwork for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of strategic development in the region. The book will be a great source of knowledge for students of Central Asia and policymakers alike.

Old Games, New Rules? Great Powers in the New Central Asia

Kathryn Stoner

In the nineteenth century, the British and Russian empires squared off in Central Asia. Britain was fixated on protecting its colony in India, and worried about political decay and Russian assertiveness in the Islamic areas to the north, particularly Afghanistan and what are now, more or less, the five Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. For its part, Russia was primarily interested in keeping the peace and gradually expanding its empire among the restive khanates to the south, if not actually going all the way to India. In the end, a war never took place between these two great powers of the day, but an ongoing set of strategic games transpired as Russia and Britain tried to capture enhanced trade opportunities that ran through the Silk Road regions.

Although the players now are a significantly weakened Russia, the United States, and China, the competition between great powers in the nineteenth century parallels the Great Games being played in Central Asia today that are so well documented in Alexander Cooley's new book *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*. One of the great strengths of Cooley's book is to explain how the interests of contemporary great powers are often thwarted or manipulated by corrupt Central Asian leaders bent on self-preservation. Still, cooperation between Central Asian states and the United States, China, and Russia has been more the norm than the exception, even if the great powers have been unable to dictate outcomes to local authorities.

With the partial exception of Russia, the interests of contemporary players of the Great Game in Central Asia are rather different than those of their nineteenth-century predecessors. The United States has become involved in Central Asia as part of the war on terrorism and U.S. efforts to wipe out the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Russia, the natural successor state to the Soviet Union, has a traditional geostrategic interest in Central Asia and views the region as part of its natural sphere of interest and security. Russia is also concerned with the protection of significant ethnic Russian populations, particularly in Kazakhstan, and perhaps most centrally, control

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over the region's lucrative gas and oil markets. China is a relative newcomer to political engagement in Central Asia. Like the United States, its interests are far narrower than Russia's and are primarily a result of Beijing's need to stabilize and prevent separation of the ethnically Uighur Xinjiang Province. To be sure, however, all three contemporary great powers are interested in Central Asia to further their own security, as were Britain and Russia in the nineteenth century.

Cooley's study of the current Great Games played by local rules is comprehensive, well-researched, and accessible. Distinct from other recent scholarship on the region, the book's focus is not domestic politics alone or the resource riches of some Central Asian governments but the interaction between domestic politics and international relations in a complex and increasingly important part of the world. For students of international relations, great-power interactions in Central Asia have "become a natural experiment for observing the dynamics of a multipolar world, including the decline of U.S. authority, the pushback against Western attempts to promote democratization and human rights, and the rise of China as an external donor and regional leader" (p. xiv). As a result, Cooley's book is a welcome addition to the literature on post-communist countries, international relations, and Central Asian politics.

Despite its considerable strengths, there are a few areas where one might quibble with the book's analysis. First, although Cooley starts out emphasizing that the regimes in Central Asia play their weak geopolitical hands strongly against great-power interests, he overlooks the fact that there is frequently an interactive effect between local and great-power interests. We learn a great deal in chapter 7, for example, about the double-dealing that went on between Russia and Kyrgyzstan in the threatened 2009 eviction of U.S. forces from the Manas airbase, a key staging and supply post for the U.S. military's efforts in Afghanistan. But this sort of manipulation by Kyrgyzstan would not have happened had Russia not supported it. Thus, it is not accurate to portray the Kyrgyz as holding all the cards in this round since Russia clearly controlled the game board.

Second, and related, Cooley underemphasizes the fact that the United States, in particular, has extremely narrow interests in Central Asia limited to its involvement in Afghanistan. The United States has no other territorial, economic, or resource interests in the region. This puts it in a rather different position in dealing with Central Asian states and gives it very little regional leverage. The United States cannot, like Russia, threaten to send back a huge influx of migrants to Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan should they not bend to its will; it cannot credibly promise great trade inflows into the area as China can. It is not surprising, therefore, that the United States maintains its temporary

military bases at the whim of the leaders of Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan (in coordination with their traditional partner and sometimes ruler Russia). Given this, we also should not find it surprising that the United States would have little leverage in promoting democracy or human rights in the region. That is, Russia and China have greater influence over Central Asian states as a natural function of geography in comparison to the United States. They live in the neighborhood. This is perhaps why the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation has worked better than any other regional international organization. Further, Russia can and has asserted itself in a rather unsavory way in Central Asian politics (as it has in Ukrainian and Georgian politics, for example). Moscow can manipulate gas and oil markets in the region, turn trade routes on or off, use soft and hard power, and upset the stability of any Central Asian state that it wants to. Russia is a regional hegemon that occasionally must negotiate with weaker powers, as Cooley notes. It is rarely, however, defeated by them on issues of great strategic importance.

Third, a more significant shortcoming is the book's tendency to overlook the extent to which Central Asian states diverge from one another and the effect that this might have on their relationships with Russia, China, and the United States. While it is fair to say, as Cooley does, using Freedom House metrics, that Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan are "not free," their regimes are not all the same either. Uzbekistan has a much harsher form of autocracy than does Kazakhstan, for example. Tajikistan and Kazakhstan differ significantly in terms of human development and state capacity. Kyrgyzstan has some experience with more liberalized forms of government than the other four Central Asian states, and it is the only one of the five states to have joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). Turkmenistan is, of course, a semi-Stalinist and largely isolated enigma.

The divergence in types of autocracies in Central Asia could reasonably affect their interactions with the three great powers operating in the region. Does the fact that Russia and China are both autocracies change the nature and quality of interactions with the autocratic, patrimonial regimes in Central Asia, for example? We should expect that it would. China is not concerned about liberalization in Uzbekistan (as was the United States in the first part of the 2000s) and is far more interested in Kyrgyzstan's stability than its potential for democracy. Beijing also does not tie aid or trade to progress on human rights, as Washington has attempted to do. Similarly, the Russian state shares many of the same pathologies as the elite-dominated, highly personalized, and under-institutionalized regimes of Central Asia, but it has less in common with more

liberalized states such as Kyrgyzstan. Should we, therefore, expect it to have a more cooperative relationship with some Central Asian states than with others?

Fourth, and related to the point above, great-power interests are not, of course, the same in each of the five Central Asian states. China, Russia, and the United States may have more or less leverage in one country than in another as a result. Russia, for example, has significant trade flows with Kazakhstan. The two countries also share a huge border, and ethnic Russians amount to 33%–50% of the population of Kazakhstan. The president of Kazakhstan speaks Russian. Both states' economies are heavily dependent on oil and gas. In contrast, Russia has a somewhat different set of interests in Kyrgyzstan. Moscow is not, for example, particularly supportive of any "color" revolution there, given its potential to spread to Russia itself. Cooley does not tell us what effect these differences might have on strategic interactions between each of the great powers and respective Central Asian states.

Fifth, and finally, Cooley argues that the Great Game in Central Asia over the past decade demonstrates the decline in U.S. power abroad. Of the three powers operating there, China is the strongest, followed closely by Russia, with the United States lagging far behind. I disagree, however, that this is a good test of U.S. power in comparison to the effort in Iraq or Afghanistan where regime change and state-building became the agendas. That is, it may be true that U.S. power is declining, but Central Asia is not a critical case where we might accurately evaluate U.S. power relative to China or Russia. After all, the United States has the least to gain (and has made the smallest effort) of all three great powers to influence politics in Central Asia. Its interests in the region are confined (as Cooley himself notes) very narrowly to the security of its temporary bases in Kyrgyzstan (and formerly in Uzbekistan). It is not attempting regime change in any of these countries, although it continues to support liberalization in Kyrgyzstan as it did in the 1990s. The amount of money that Cooley documents was spent on human rights and democracy promotion in Uzbekistan, for example, was pocket change to the U.S. government; it was not a serious effort to democratize the region. Similarly, the United States has made few attempts to trade with or create sustainable multilateral institutions in the region, as neighboring China and Russia have done. Before the war in Afghanistan, the United States had little involvement in Central Asia. After the drawdown of troops in 2014, that will undoubtedly again be the case, even with a lingering military presence.

Despite these five critiques, Alexander Cooley has written an excellent book. It should be required reading for anyone interested in better understanding one of the most fascinating and complex areas of the world.

Why Washington Needs to Integrate the New Silk Road with the Pivot to Asia

Andrew C. Kuchins

Alexander Cooley's *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* is a must-read strategic primer of the challenges and opportunities for any aspiring great power in Central Asia. His analysis tracks the varying successes of the United States, Russia, and China in Central Asia since 2001 and the onset of the war in Afghanistan. The events of September 11 dramatically increased Washington's interests in the region and shifted them predominantly to support the war in Afghanistan. During this past decade under Vladimir Putin, Russia—recovering from its loss of empire and the economic disaster of the 1990s—has sought to reassert its influence through various bilateral policies and multilateral institutions. China's regional influence has grown principally through economic means, and its favored multilateral security and economic institution is the aptly named Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

But while great powers may have grand designs, the real story of Cooley's book is how effectively regional leaders have been able to manipulate and play off the economic and security interests of the great powers to strengthen the sovereignty of their states, as well as increase their political and economic leverage over domestic political competitors. If a state is unwilling to play by local rules, achieving other policy goals will be met with a mounting parade of obstacles. In the case of the United States, for example, this meant quieting objections to human rights violations and democratic shortcomings for return for support in Afghan war efforts. Of course, such trade-offs offend the high morals that Americans like to claim in U.S. foreign policy. I recall several years ago a State Department official telling me with a straight face that our engagement of Central Asian states in the Northern Distribution Network, a set of new transit corridors to support U.S. troops in Afghanistan, would increase our ability to support the cause of defending human rights in Central Asia. Suffice to say, there has been no evidence in the past three years to support this contention.

The track record of the Russians since 2001 has been mixed at best. After more than one hundred years as part of the Russian empire and the Soviet

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Union, Central Asian states remain very sensitive to initiatives from Moscow, whose likely goal is to erode their sovereignty or interfere on one side or another in their domestic politics. Russia, as a provider of public goods, strikes Central Asian elites as almost oxymoronic. Regional perceptions of the United States as a provider of public goods may be higher, but Washington's credibility suffers from being viewed as a "short-timer" whose interests can be ever so fickle. Cooley argues that in this triangular competition over the past decade or so, China has probably "won on points," as Beijing is viewed as only interested in economic ties that increase jobs and build infrastructure (p. 165). However, the accelerating shift to a genuinely multipolar environment in Eurasia increases the options for Central Asian states to partner with outside countries, including India, Turkey, Iran, and others; thus, the competition grows for access to the region's assets, be they military, strategic, economic, or otherwise.

Certainly, from a U.S. standpoint, we are at a crossroads with Central Asia. As the United States withdraws its troops from Afghanistan, U.S. interest and influence in the region, as Cooley suggests, is bound to decline. After more than a decade in Afghanistan and Iraq, the mantra "No more land wars in Eurasia" reverberates from the White House to Foggy Bottom to the Pentagon. The new strategic buzz in Washington is the "pivot to Asia," which essentially boils down to the management of the rise of China's power and influence in the years and decades to come. But the Obama administration's conception of Asia goes back more than a hundred years ago to that of Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, the United States' first great strategic thinker. Mahan regarded Asia as consisting of East Asia, or the area from Northeast Asia to Southeast Asia. Thus, Washington's focus has been on the Asia-Pacific region for over a century, as evidenced by wars with Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.

China's historical and cultural interpretation of Asia is not surprisingly very different, as it includes eastern areas of Russia to its north, Central Asia and Afghanistan to its west, and Pakistan and India to its southwest. Just as the Obama administration announced its pivot to Asia, leading Chinese strategic thinkers, such as Wang Jisi at Beijing University, began to increasingly advocate for China's march to the west through Central Asia to Iran and the greater Middle East.¹ This is not to suggest that China views these regions to the north, west, and south as its territory—although China is engaged in a long-standing territorial dispute with India and also made a small claim in

¹ See Wang Jisi, "Marching Westwards: The Rebalancing of China's Geostrategy," *International and Strategic Studies*, no. 73 (2012).

July 2012 to seventeen kilometers in the Altai region, despite a 2004 border treaty with Russia that was to resolve the issue forever. Wang is not suggesting a military march, of course, but rather a continued expansion of Chinese economic influence and power to the west.

While it may be politically incorrect to use the word “containment” in regard to U.S. policy toward China, containment is certainly how the pivot to Asia is understood in Beijing. So the Chinese response will be to continue to build high-speed trains, highways, and pipelines from western China to the greater Middle East, as well as to ports on the Indian Ocean, as their trade and investment ties accompany this strategic goal. I should not overstate this since China’s highest strategic and economic priorities will lie to its east for a long time to come. But increasing access and influence to the north, west, and southwest are significant and natural strategic goals as well. There is a strong argument for Beijing to do so, as a westward push could provide transcontinental shipping routes for oil, gas, and other goods that would be far removed from the purview of the U.S. Navy.

This brings us back to the theme of Cooley’s book: the way in which the jockeying of Russian, U.S., and Chinese great-power designs among the Central Asian states enhance these states own sovereignty and domestic political power. Beijing’s economic power in this part of the world will continue to grow, absent an economic meltdown in China. Chinese companies, unconstrained by anything like the U.S. Foreign Corrupt Practices Act or shareholder reporting, will continue to line the pockets of local, regional, and national officials in Central Asia to strengthen their access to the region’s mineral and hydrocarbon resources and will build more transit infrastructure to ship these goods to the Chinese market. Ever since the financial crisis, China, with its more than \$3 trillion in foreign exchange reserves, has been on a global buying spree that increasingly raises concerns, especially among its mineral-rich neighbors. Chinese domination of Mongolia’s rapidly growing economy (the second-fastest growing economy in the world right now) reached such a point that the parliament in Ulaanbaatar recently passed legislation that requires legislative approval of any foreign investment over \$70 million.² Even in Central Asia’s largest and most wealthy state, Kazakhstan, there is considerable concern about the increasing Chinese stakes in Kazakh oil and gas resources, as well as about illegal Chinese migrant workers. Russia is also concerned that its eastern

² See Oliver Backes, “China at the Gates: China’s Impact on Mongolian Natural Resources and Investment Policy,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 6, 2013 ~ <http://csis.org/blog/china-gates-chinas-impact-mongolian-natural-resource-and-investment-policy/>.

regions, which are rich in hydrocarbon and mineral wealth, will be gobbled up by Chinese companies, effectively eroding Russian sovereignty.

The best defense for the Central Asian states, Russia, and all of China's neighbors is improvement of their investment environments to make them more attractive to a wider set of bidders. But this requires improved governance, transparent and effective rule of law, strengthened property rights, and all of those good things that attack the foundations of patrimonial authoritarian systems. If China's economic presence is viewed as too heavy-handed or pervasive, there will be increasing public opposition to it that local leaders will have to address. The China factor was not the main reason behind the riots in Zhanozhen, Kazakhstan, in December 2011, but it did play a role.

Probably the most potentially effective policy strategy that the United States has in this region in the coming years is the so-called vision of a new Silk Road: a regional economic cooperation strategy for Afghanistan and its neighbors that emphasizes strengthening both hard and soft trade and transit infrastructure to link the "heart of Asia" with the greater Middle East, East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Russia, and Europe. Although the region certainly needs more railroads, roads, modern airports, and the like, the biggest obstacle to moving goods rapidly and predictably to multiple markets in all directions is bureaucratic and institutional—what both I and Cooley call "borders acting as toll booths" (p. 154). As virtually all studies conclude, reduction of graft and red tape at the borders will do more to strengthen regional economic connectivity and increase the variety of market options for Central Asian states than any other policy action. Cooley is right to conclude that, so far, the internal nature of the regional patrimonial states is the biggest obstacle (see pp. 149–61), but if national sovereignty in the region feels under greater threat, perhaps reviving the network of transcontinental transit corridors that Washington calls the new Silk Road may achieve a more positive response from albeit reluctant regional leaders. The United States would benefit from viewing support for this initiative as a key part of the strategic pivot to Asia.

Domestic Challenges, International Opportunities: Understanding Security Cooperation in Central Asia

Erica Marat

The Central Asian countries are often defined as passive observers of the U.S., Russian, and Chinese rivalry, a conflict of interests that resembles the Great Game between Great Britain and tsarist Russia roughly a century ago. The comparison is often drawn for lack of a better empirical understanding of how Central Asia's five post-Soviet countries function on the international scene, while the United States' interest in the region significantly increased in the post-September 11 era, much to the dismay of neighboring Russia and China.

Alexander Cooley's *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* dispels the myth that these "big three" are locked into constant competition. While competition among the United States, Russia, and China exists, there are also instances of collaboration on joint goals, mimicking of one another's policies, and opportunities to free ride, owing to various security arrangements led by one or another of the three.

Yet it is the Central Asian political elites who seem to benefit the most from the increased interest of global powers. The political elites in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have developed "local rules" for playing the big three against each other for the benefit of domestic audiences, primarily to prevail over political rivals and strengthen their own hold on power. The most blatant example of leveraging the Kremlin's displeasure with the U.S. military to benefit the mercantile interests of the political elites comes from Kyrgyzstan's former president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev. In 2009, Bakiyev secured both a \$2 billion loan from Russia and a significant increase in U.S. payments to use an airbase in Bishkek by first announcing that he would expel the U.S. military from the base and then four months later changing his mind. Uzbekistan president Islam Karimov has also been skillful in keeping both Russia and the United States nervous about his engagement in regional initiatives, such as the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or providing access to the U.S.-NATO Northern Distribution Network for Afghanistan.

Just as Cooley uncovers the patrimonial logic of the Central Asian leaders' foreign policy, he also shows how each of the big three powers at one time

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or another developed patron-client relations with the Central Asian states. Seeking to advance their own interests in the region, Moscow, Washington, and Beijing often ignored reports of human rights abuses and were ready to engage with corrupt leaders if needed. By explaining the logic of the big three's policy decisions in Central Asia since the September 11 terrorist attacks, *Great Games, Local Rules* is as much a book about transnational and domestic corruption as it is about international relations.

The book also demonstrates how regional actors—India, South Korea, Turkey, and Japan—were effectively squeezed out of Central Asia by the overwhelming presence of the big three. Those countries, although sharing economic and political interests in the region, were unable to build trade relations and political alliances with the Central Asian countries because these niches were quickly filled by regional organizations led by Russia, China, and the United States.

Great Games, Local Rules offers a rich analytical and empirical basis for further research in both international relations and Central Asian studies. The book poses three interrelated questions about how local rules developed in response to the global powers' competition in Central Asia. First, are local rules in Central Asia the sign of a new norm in which small countries play great powers against each other instead of looking for win-win solutions? Are they emerging as a result of declining Western influence? Beyond Central Asia, does the collaboration among several global powers and small states follow a similar logic? Cooley explains the emergence of local rules as the product of a post-Western world in which the United States must compete with regional powers.

Second, how uniform are the local rules of Central Asia? The ousting of Bakiyev in 2010 demonstrated that erratic foreign policy breeds corruption and angers opposition groups. By contrast, Kazakhstan president Nursultan Nazarbayev's balanced foreign policy has led to years of fruitful relations with Washington, Moscow, and Beijing and contributed to strong domestic support for his regime. Did Bakiyev overplay his advantages? And is Nazarbayev-like behavior the epitome of effective local rules in the region?

Finally, can the Central Asian states in fact be treated as a coherent region? *Great Games, Local Rules* approaches the five states as constituting a region, while acknowledging that they in no way function as a single economic bloc. The differences among these countries' economic and political development continue to grow wider over time. Because the five states lack economic integration and have been implementing restrictive border regimes, Cooley asks whether Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan should be considered in the same fashion as, for instance, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova—countries that

share geographical proximity but are substantially different from one another in terms of post-Soviet political and economic development.

Cooley tackles this issue by outlining several perspectives that regard Central Asia as a region. The United States, Russia, and China lump the Central Asian states together because of the political and security interests they pursue there. Furthermore, the Central Asian states themselves often pretend for regional audiences to function as political allies, even though economic integration has not taken place. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, regional integration is taking place from the bottom up, courtesy of shuttle traders who bypass strict border regimes in search of profit. These shuttle traders transit goods from China through Kyrgyzstan to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. These informal trade routes might one day shape the parameters of regional trade agreements.

By posing these questions, *Great Games, Local Rules* is an important stepping-stone toward building a theory of international relations based on Central Asia that differs from classical Western approaches. The book's empirical richness should appeal to a wide range of readers looking to understand how Russia, China, and the United States formulate their policies toward Central Asia as well as how those policies are received in the region.

The Rules of Central Asia's Games Are Changing

S. Enders Wimbush

Alexander Cooley's concise and well-written analysis of the evolving contest among Russia, China, and the United States for position and influence in Central Asia is indeed welcome. *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* is likely to be the starting point for future assessments of this region. These should multiply as the complexity of the regional and global dynamics that affect Central Asia deepens.

New actors are already entering the region with their own unique objectives and strategies. Some traditional actors will be eclipsed as their capabilities wane or as they seek respite from distant entanglements there.

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New generations of Central Asian elites will soon compete for power, and some will harbor very different visions for how their countries should be governed, strategically aligned, and integrated into a global economy. Conflicts spawned by the region's failed and failing states and aggressive ideologies from abroad will produce security challenges that cascade across borders. Stability will prove elusive and outright peace probably unobtainable. Not surprisingly, today's "rules of the game," appropriately described by Cooley, will change.

I would argue that by 2012, when *Great Games, Local Rules* appeared, the rules were already evolving in several Central Asian countries, not changing so much as adding new layers. Cooley is correct to emphasize the Soviet-era mindset of today's generation of Central Asian leaders. For them, ensuring the survival of their patrimonial regimes, gaming their economies for maximum personal gain, and guarding the gate lest outside influences disrupt these comfy arrangements is instinctive.

But it is increasingly evident that this is not the limit of their strategic visions, at least not all of them. Uzbekistan's president Islam Karimov is notable for his grasp of Central Asia's larger strategic dynamics. For example, his efforts to encourage tighter economic integration with Afghanistan through energy and transport demonstrate his understanding of how that country's vulnerabilities could spike after the U.S. withdrawal in 2014 and affect Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Kazakhstan's president Nursultan Nazarbayev has substantially redesigned his country's foreign-policy objectives and practices, which recently featured hosting 5+2 talks on Iran's nuclear ambitions.¹ Even hermetically sealed Turkmenistan shows an inclination in this direction with its recent energy diplomacy.

Great Games, Local Rules masterfully describes how the Central Asian leaders successfully play the great powers off against each other, often resulting in the latter acquiescing to the local rules of the game. But more is at work here, at least in some places—something we might think of as strategic intent that transcends purely local interests. Another way to describe this distinction is to note the sharp contrast of these states' former status as the objects of other states' foreign policy with their current status as strategic actors in their own right. One might interpret these countries' design of larger strategies as efforts to double-down on the patrimonial rules Cooley describes, and that might be right. But I doubt that doubling-down is the sole or even the

¹ The 5+2 talks include Transnistria, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, plus the United States and the European Union.

most powerful incentive. The emerging Central Asian landscape described by Marlene Laruelle and Sebastien Peyrouse in their groundbreaking book *Globalizing Central Asia* will become increasingly inhospitable terrain for the old rules, though they will certainly linger for at least a generation or more. We should anticipate several Central Asian states becoming more assertive actors in a larger strategic universe, which is where their interests will increasingly be located. This will add additional complexity and uncertainty to the new great-power contest in the region.

Every great contest needs some great contestants. Yet the triangular contest for power in Central Asia among Russia, China, and the United States is very unequal, more scalene than equilateral. Of these, Russia strikes me as the least able to compete effectively for the long haul. Spiraling down across virtually all measures of power, authority, and influence, Russia is a dying state tempting debilitating crises at multiple levels. Cooley's discussion of Russia's seeming indifference to the fate of Central Asia after the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 is spot on, as is his assessment that "the main challenge in analyzing Russian policy toward Central Asia is that it lacks a single overriding strategic goal" (p. 51). This begs the question: how can a state compete effectively if its objectives are unclear and its competitive resources are being quickly depleted? Nearly all Russian initiatives to regain prestige and stature in the region have failed to impress the Central Asians, much less the Chinese. Writing in 2011, I concluded that "Russia is not one of Asia's rising powers but the opposite."² I see nothing today suggesting otherwise.

Can we say that the United States also lacks an overriding strategic goal in Central Asia? When Central Asia was suddenly released from Soviet control in 1991, Americans were even more indifferent to the region than the Russians because few of them knew anything about it. I am unaware of Central Asia ever figuring in U.S. strategy at more than a transactional level. Cooley's account strengthens this conclusion.

President Obama underlined the transactional basis of U.S. involvement by fixing the date for the transaction to end in 2014. This decision was apparently made without regard for the longer-term strategic implications of the United States' virtual disappearance from this contest—not just for China and Russia but for all of Eurasia's key actors. Consider that Central Asia today is arguably the world's most contested geography.

² S. Enders Wimbush, "Great Games in Central Asia," in *Strategic Asia 2011–12: Asia Responds to Its Rising Powers—China and India*, ed. Ashley J. Tellis, Travis Tanner, and Jessica Keough (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2011), 279.

Powerful regional states—Russia, China, India, Iran, and Turkey—all seek a competitive advantage in the Central Asian space. This list includes four nuclear powers, with a fifth (Iran) close at hand and possibly a sixth (Turkey) further over the horizon. Outside contestants—for example, the United States, Europe, Japan, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia—increase the density of this strategic soup. Is this an arena where the United States can afford strategic fatigue?

Meanwhile, China's quiet incremental penetration of Central Asia gathers momentum. It is not without issue, and occasionally the Chinese encounter pushback on the ground, usually when they are insensitive to cultural norms, customs, or preferences. But Beijing's use of economic incentives, a comparatively efficient labor force, and engaged regional organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, through which China can identify opportunities and leverage corporate diplomacy, far outstrips Russia's ability to compete or counter. To the extent that Central Asia is a great-power contest, it is now China's to lose.

With the United States heading for Central Asia's exits, the contest loses a strong stabilizing player. One wonders if the White House ever considered how a continued U.S. presence in the region, perhaps no more than a few hundred soldiers in training missions and other activities, might affect the blossoming uncertainties that a U.S. absence will undoubtedly produce. As I speculated last year in testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Committee, such a residual presence—in Uzbekistan, for example—could exert a calming influence on what could rapidly become an unruly and possibly violent competition among Central Asia's other contestants.³

Cooley's analysis and logical exposition alert readers to the possibility of alternative futures in Central Asia about which the United States has thought little and for which it is ill prepared. *Great Games, Local Rules* is in that respect an excellent starting point. I hope Cooley will accept his own challenge.

³ S. Enders Wimbush, "The United States and Central Asia," testimony before the House Subcommittee on Europe and Eurasia, Washington, D.C., July 24, 2012 ~ <http://archives.republicans.foreignaffairs.house.gov/112/HHRG-112-FA14-WState-WimbushS-20120724.pdf>.

Can We Change the Rules? External Actors and Central Asia Beyond 2014

Alexander Cooley

I wrote *Great Games, Local Rules* in the hope of facilitating a dialogue between observers of Central Asia and international relations scholars interested in the political dynamics of the post–Cold War world. For too long, the latter group has ignored Central Asia, dismissing it as an exotic arena of imperial competition and opaque local tradition that is of little global relevance. Specifically, I wished to flag what I considered important trends of the multipolar regional order—U.S. tacit security bargains and declining normative power, the Russian-led backlash against Western democratic norms and human rights promotion, and China’s rise as a dominant economic player. Most importantly, I wanted to draw wider attention to the statecraft of the Central Asian states, demonstrating how relatively weaker states can still channel, translate, and manipulate external interests and agendas for their own domestic political purposes.

Engaging in an *Asia Policy* discussion about these ideas is therefore a deeply enriching and humbling opportunity, for the scholars assembled in this forum are all distinguished researchers and long-time observers of the Eurasian political landscape. A short response cannot do all of their points justice so I look forward to engaging with the important issues they raise beyond just these pages.

I have grouped my response to the reviews into three categories of topics raised by the roundtable participants: (1) the appropriateness of my analytical framework for explaining major regional developments and interactions, (2) the relevance of Central Asia’s lessons to other areas of the post–Cold War world, and (3) the implications for U.S. policy toward the region following the planned U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014.

The Analytical Framework of Great Games, Local Rules

My main analytical purpose in the book is to show how the “big three” external powers have sought different strategic goals in the region, but I also illuminate how, in addition to competition, the external powers have cooperated, mimicked, and learned from one another as they interacted in the Central

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Asian arena. All the while, the region's autocrats have used these external interactions as opportunities to extract resources to preserve their regimes, feed their domestic patronage machines, and push back against external criticism or conditions that might threaten the political status quo. James Sherr identifies these patrimonial dynamics as the political antithesis of western liberal and democratic institutions, though he is prudent to caution that the region's patrimonialism is neither pure nor immune from all transformative attempts. Yet the lens of patronage politics provides what I think is a theoretically useful assumption for examining internal-external interactions. Rent-seeking, pseudo-reforms, and competing norms are logical consequences that flow from these political imperatives, rather than an exceptional or even culturally bound set of local behaviors.

Nevertheless, in a bid for parsimony, I do oversimplify. Kathryn Stoner rightly suspects that the different flavors of authoritarianism within the region might also affect their patterns of external engagement. How else can one explain Turkmenistan's latching onto China so quickly as its main external patron, the close Kazakh-Russian partnership, or the prickly relations of repressive and paranoid Uzbek president Islam Karimov with both Moscow and Washington? Marlene Laruelle accurately notes that societal actors, such as businesses and migrants, are absent from my state-centric account, while Enders Wimbush and Sherr point out that some of the Central Asian states have graduated beyond these elite-led imperatives and are pursuing external engagements with the purpose of both enhancing their international standing (Kazakhstan especially) and influencing the region more broadly (in the case of Uzbekistan). These are fair and important observations. And even competitive patrimonialism has its limits. As Erica Marat observes, Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiyev overplayed his hand when he initiated a public bidding war between Russia and the United States over the Manas airbase.

Although regional elites undoubtedly will be concerned with an increasingly complex array of personal, social, and national agendas going forward, it is worth recalling the region's political context during the 2000s. All of the regions' rulers consolidated their grip on power and then proceeded to securitize their coercive organs in response to counterterrorism imperatives and perceptions of imminent transnational regime threats. In so doing, they were supported by all three external security patrons. Perhaps a more productive way of advancing our understanding, to echo John Heathershaw's earlier critique of my book, would be to think more systematically about how these elites and new societal actors are joined in a number of transnational networks that interpenetrate the region, be it narcotics trafficking, the unofficial shuttle trade, money laundering, and

foreign deal-making financiers, or as sites for the dissemination of contested norms and international standards.

The participants also note other important ways in which the analysis might be starting to date itself. Both Andrew Kuchins and Wimbush, I believe correctly, observe a growing complexity and contestation over the region that involves not only the “big three” patrons of Russia, the United States, and China, but several other actors such as Turkey, India, South Korea, Japan, the Gulf States, and Iran. These states too offer the Central Asian governments new opportunities and strategic partnerships; though, as I briefly explore in the case of India negotiating for basing rights with Tajikistan, they occasionally have also overestimated the extent of their own potential for regional influence. Mamuka Tsereteli also points to a looming social backlash against Chinese economic penetration in the region, especially the visible presence of Chinese workers and the asymmetrical terms of trade China has forged with the region. This is an important issue that at some point will surely come to a head, though unlike parts of Africa that have experienced anti-Chinese backlashes, Central Asia’s less vibrant civil societies and weaker organized labor movements may limit the formal political opportunities for such campaigns.

Central Asia and the Dynamics, Institutions, and Norms of International Order

Sherr describes *Great Games* as a “cogent critique of post-Cold War orthodoxy.” I am not accustomed to sporting the revisionist label, but I will gladly accept it if the book prompts scholars and policymakers to re-examine some underlying assumptions about the extent of Western influence in emerging regional orders in areas such as the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Latin America.

On the U.S. regional role, in particular, Stoner advances an important and powerful counterargument: given the United States’ overwhelming interest in stabilizing Afghanistan, and the resulting instrumentalization of the region for that military campaign, U.S. policy toward Central Asia is *sui generis*, hardly comparable to its role in other parts of the world. In short, the United States did not fail in its bid to influence Central Asia, mostly because Washington did not actually commit significant levels of resources or political capital to the region.

Many U.S. policymakers share Stoner’s observations, and she is on the mark to say that the United States has not intensively engaged with the region beyond the security sphere. However, her comparative point follows only if we view U.S. strategic interest and focus as the primary determinants of its

actual international influence. A cursory look at the political outcomes of U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq suggests otherwise.

Here, Marat frames the question helpfully: is diminished U.S. standing in Central Asia the result of U.S. decline or the result of the Central Asian states actively seeking and finding alternative patrons who are less critical of their internal policies? If we analytically privilege how the Central Asian states have become more adept at leveraging alternatives and pushing back against the Western normative agenda, then the mechanism explaining this observed U.S. waning is both beyond the scope of U.S. intentions and more readily transferrable to other regions.

A couple of examples of both “hard security” and “soft power” illustrate the importance of this analytical distinction. For example, the fact that the United States has provided private goods to the Uzbek and Kyrgyz governments to maintain military bases and access routes in the face of Russian pressure could be, on its own, explained away as an unremarkable and one-off side effect of its Afghanistan-centered engagement. But taken together with other recent failed bargains and contested access agreements—including the Iraqi government’s refusal to grant the United States a long-term status of forces agreement in 2011, Pakistan’s periodic closure of the southern logical routes and demands for more security assistance, and the political turbulence over U.S. military facilities in Ecuador or Bahrain, where host governments have turned to alternative patrons (China and Saudi Arabia, respectively)—it is more difficult to dismiss the Central Asian cases as isolated. U.S. base hosts and strategic partners worldwide appear increasingly willing to invoke exit options for domestic political purposes.¹

In the soft-power sphere, the U.S. and Western role as the primary providers of public goods—development assistance, investments in infrastructure, rulemaking, and standard setting—is also clearly being undermined. China offers loans and infrastructure financing without the domestic conditions demanded by Western-dominated international financial institutions. However, unlike its role in many parts of Africa or Southeast Asia, Beijing does not usually actively participate in international donor coordination activities in Bishkek or Dushanbe. Thus, Chinese economic assistance has allowed countries like Tajikistan and Turkmenistan to avoid turning to Western lenders during the economic crisis, thereby diminishing Western leverage over them. It is worth noting that, as an external donor, China has also seen the mismanagement

¹ I explore this topic at greater length in a forthcoming article co-authored with Daniel Nexon. See Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, “The Empire will Compensate You? The Structural Dynamics of the U.S. Overseas Basing Network,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 4 (2013).

of its funds as local elites have turned public works projects into private revenue streams.

In addition, the region has spawned its own new organizations that provide novel frameworks for cooperation, alternative normative standards, and legal justifications. Groups such as the Chinese-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Eurasian Economic Community Customs Union present themselves as more appropriate regional alternatives to the hegemonic Western counterparts, even as they quite deliberately copy the organizational forms, if not substance, of the Organization for Security Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), NATO, and the European Union. These new regional organizations provide legal and normative buffers to member states from external pressures and international criticism.

There is also, I would argue, a sociological dimension at play here: a rising global demand in policy and academic circles for a workable antithesis or model to U.S.-led international architectures. Such analysis, as Laruelle observes, permeates and biases much coverage of the SCO and, I would add, its more global counterpart, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) forum. Why else would there be such international fascination with the SCO despite the gaping mismatch between its ambitious multilateral agenda and its actual meager accomplishments? Similarly, what makes the meme that the U.S. promotes double-standards on human rights when dealing with Central Asian rulers so resonant, when realpolitik long dominated its Cold War policy to friendly autocrats?

It is here that the contemporary global spotlight becomes more damaging. For regardless of Washington's actual intentions and limited regional ambitions, the United States' struggles in Central Asia have been publicly aired by global media outlets and international advocacy groups, many of them keen to note the inconsistency between Washington's value-based rhetoric and its strategic bargains.

U.S. Engagement in Central Asia after the Drawdown of U.S. Forces from Afghanistan

Finally, the roundtable raises the critical question of just what type of engagement the United States should maintain in Central Asia given its drawdown from Afghanistan.

The answer, I think, depends on the criteria that are invoked when posing the question. If the question posed asks what the vital U.S. long-term strategic

interests are in the region, seeing none, a plausible case for disengagement could be made. However, abandoning the region would be shortsighted, and the roundtable authors offer some important and forward-looking strategic rationales for maintaining engagement. Looking eastward, Kuchins views U.S. sustained engagement in Eurasia as a logical accompaniment to Washington's East Asian pivot. Wimbush sees the complexity and layering of the region, and of its different actors, as a compelling reason for why the United States must remain engaged as an arena of global interest. He also advocates that U.S. troops would provide a stabilizing presence in the region, perhaps by maintaining a residual force in Uzbekistan.

Both are important strategic rationales to consider, but both also carry some risks. Chinese and U.S. relations in Central Asia have been relatively cooperative, but the potential for competition certainly exists in areas such as energy politics and some of the global order issues identified earlier. The combination of a more robust Silk Road strategy, an enduring U.S. security presence on China's western flank, and Beijing's fear of outside meddling in Xinjiang might make the U.S. presence in Eurasia the target of a future Chinese counterthrust.

Wimbush's plea for an enduring regional military presence in Uzbekistan may be particularly disconcerting to Russia, which seems to have used the uncertainty generated by the U.S. drawdown to opportunistically reassert itself in its relations with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, concluding deals for new military bases, promising new military assistance packages and investments in strategic sectors, and pressing these states to commit to joining the Moscow-led customs union. In the Kyrgyz case, Moscow has also compelled Bishkek to stick to a public commitment that it will close Manas in 2014 following the expiration of the current agreement.

Given Tsereteli's observation about the growing disconnect between Russian ambitions and capabilities, the regional fallout of Moscow's renewed effort to turn the smaller Central Asian states into political clients may become messy if Russian support exacerbates long-standing regional rivalries with Uzbekistan over water rights, disputes about borders and ethnic enclaves, and, as Tsereteli identifies, the uncertainty of looming political transitions in Astana and Tashkent. The potential for regional entanglements by the United States and Russia in local disputes, even in the pursuit of stability, remains ever-present.

On the other hand, a good case can be made that the drawdown from Afghanistan will untie the hands of both Washington and Brussels and allow them to focus on a more balanced portfolio of non-security matters, including promoting international legal standards, campaigning for the whole Central

Asian region's accession into the WTO, bettering the region's still dismal human rights records, encouraging educational programs and exchanges, and improving governance and transparency. Even in the realm of continued security cooperation and counterterrorism, there is room both to remain effective against transnational threats and to nudge local and regional practices toward greater conformity with emerging international practices and legal standards. And at some point, U.S. and EU officials will need to make a more public case about why their approaches to regional challenges—such as ensuring political stability, mitigating and resolving conflicts, guaranteeing minority and religious rights, nurturing civil society, and insisting on transparency in government—are not just policies that suit the agendas of the West, but actually offer a more sustainable basis for pursuing state-building and regional integration, and indeed for partaking in globalization itself. But the West will be hard-pressed to actually sell these messages unless policymakers can demonstrate a longer-term regional commitment to the Central Asian governments, as well as some humility and self-reflection on the so-called “values issues.”

I fully agree that complexity and uncertainty are likely to characterize the region for some time. In response, the United States must overcome its strategic fatigue, be more pragmatic in its dealings with Moscow and Beijing, and accept that its actions in this region have important, even if unintended, demonstration effects in other venues on a variety of security, economic, social, and legal matters. All the while, Washington must do a better job of listening to local perspectives about the region's looming challenges and actively defending U.S. principles and norms from regional alternatives that are gaining currency. In short, successful multipolar diplomacy will require considerable multitasking. ♦



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