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THE STABILITY PARADOX IN CENTRAL ASIA

by Pavel Baev

In the 22 years long post-Soviet period, Central Asia has remained far more stable than standard risk analysis would predict, given the intensity of internal tensions and disagreement between external impacts. Alex Cooley demonstrates convincingly the deep differences between the US, Russia and China in defining what “stability” in this geographically land-locked and politically anti-modern region is about; he is also absolutely right in arguing that these differences do not amount to direct competition, for which the cliché “New Great Game” has long been coined – and never made any sense. He may be not quite correct, however, reducing the emphasis on “stability” to a “convenient rhetorical exercise”. What is really odd about these three policies is that each of them is based on a particular definition of “stability” – and is executed in a way that is not compatible with it. This incompatibility of the proclaimed aims and employed means constitutes a “stability paradox”, which is set to acquire a dramatic character as the interplay between various conflicts in the region escalates, while the regimes are fast approaching their respective expiration dates.

Starting with the US, we can see that this paradox cuts deeper than just sacrificing the compromised “democracy promotion” for the access to the infrastructure supporting the Northern Distribution Network. The fundamental premise of the US strategic assessment is that stability in Central Asia could only be achieved through the transformation of the corrupt authoritarian regimes towards what Cooley calls “responsive governance”, as well as through building a regional security system with the support of the European NATO allies and the EU. In reality, all efforts at fostering cooperation between Central Asian states have long been abandoned as useless, while the joint work with the allies is centered on securing safe withdrawal from Afghanistan. The EU has lost whatever “soft power” it tried to project by Pavel Baev

Russia has no doubt about identifying stability in Central Asia with continuation of the ruling regimes, obviously reflecting on the domestic ideological dogma that only the “verticality of power” created by President Vladimir Putin holds the country from collapsing into anarchy and disintegration. Contrary to this article of faith, Moscow orchestrated the coup against the Bakiyev regime in Kyrgyzstan in April 2010, stopped abruptly importing gas from Turkmenistan in April 2009, thus putting in peril Berdymuhamedov’s regime, and picked quite a few quarrels with Karimov’s regime in Uzbekistan, which constitutes the key link in the chain of despotic regimes in the region. Russia also puts a strong emphasis on the strengthening of regional security system structured first of all by the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and other institutions, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.
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