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Monday, September 16, 2013

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 and accepted its inability to play even a supportive role in Central Asia. The pragmatic approach of the Obama administration to doing security business with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan directly contributes to consolidation of the despotic regimes (Cooley's term "normative regression" appears rather academic for this ugly process). This is completely at cross-purposes with the proposition for encouraging democratic reforms, moderating corruption and curtailing narco-trafficking.

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

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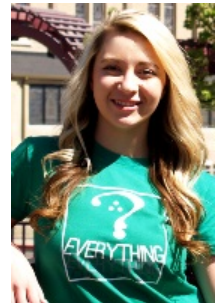
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Organization (SCO). This institution-building falls far short of "an almost demonstrative obsession with projecting influence" (as Cooley argues). It has provided for plenty of high-level networking but for very little hard substance. Russia has never put serious resources behind this political aim and is not building sufficient military muscle for performing convincingly the role of "stability provider". Its failure to intervene into the Osh riots in summer 2010, was caused by the shortage of projectable power, and no "rapid deployment corps" will spring to life in the course of badly mismanaged military reform.

China associates "stability" in Central Asia with deterring and suppressing the "three evils" of terrorism, extremism and separatism, but Beijing resolutely rejects any intention to intervene into a crisis caused by a manifestation of one of these "evils". It also refrains from providing targeted support to the ruling regimes in building capacity for combating these threats, leaving this job to Russia, which stages some exercises but puts very little real effort into the hard work. China also derives "stability" from economic development, which sounds very reasonable, but in fact, its payments for imported raw materials and aid programs promote corruption and inequality rather than small business growth. At the same time, the inflow of Chinese imported goods and traders chokes local industries and disrupts traditional bazaars, which generates economic tensions rather than prosperity. China can provide certain political protection for the Central Asian rulers in exterminating the opposition, as it did for Karimov's regime after the Andijan massacre in May 2005, but it is not seen as a reliable "enforcer" of despotic law and order.

What makes it problematic for all three great powers to continue elaborating their respective parts of this security paradox is the schedule for withdrawal of the US and coalition forces from Afghanistan. Moscow, for that matter, is absolutely certain that the Karzai regime has about the same chance to cling to power as the Najibullah regime had after the withdrawal of Soviet troops in early 1989. The Kremlin expects that the escalation of violent chaos in Afghanistan would scare the rulers of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and even Kazakhstan into begging for Russian protection, which may or may not come true, but even if it did, the capacity to seal the 2,000 km long border is non-existent. The US has lost credibility as a leading conflict manager and nation-builder, but it has also lost interest in the wider Caspian area, which a decade ago appeared to be of paramount geopolitical and petro-political importance. It is difficult to figure out where the strategic thinking in Beijing about the conflict interplay between Afghanistan and Central Asia is going, and it is hardly far-fetched to suggest that China has no clue.

It is counter-intuitive to observe that the spectacular turmoil in the greater Middle East since the start of 2011 has had no discernible resonance in Central Asia, but it would have been absurd to conclude that the corrupt presidents-for-life are not destined to share Hosni Mubarak's fate. Whichever goes first, Russia's interpretation of "stability" as prolongation of the sagging authoritarian regimes will be shattered (unless street protests in Moscow would cancel it before). China would have to face its powerlessness in deterring the "evil" of extremism, but the US would hardly have reasons to rejoice over the breakthrough in democratization as jihad and pogrom would blend and give a new meaning to the tired term "failed state". Whatever meaning is ascribed to the notion of "stability", the external powers that have been proclaiming their commitment to upholding it and acting in complete disregard of this commitment, would have to learn how the word "khalas", which now rocks Cairo and Tunis, sounds in Uzbek and Kazakh.

Pavel Baev is a Norwegian political scientist and security scholar. He is currently a research professor at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) and a senior nonresident fellow at the Brookings Institution (Washington, DC). Baev graduated from Moscow State University (M.A. in economic and political geography, 1979) and worked in a research institute in the USSR Ministry of Defence. He received his PhD in international relations from the Institute for US and Canadian Studies in Moscow in 1988, then worked in the newly created Institute of Europe in Moscow until 1992, when he moved to Oslo, Norway and joined PRIO. In 1994-1996, he held a 'Democratic Institutions Fellowship' from NATO. From 1995-2001, Baev was co-editor of the academic journal Security Dialogue, and From 1999-2005 he was a member of the PRIO board. Baev's current research includes the transformation of the Russian military, Russia – European Union relations, Russia's energy policy, Russia's policy in the Arctic, terrorism and conflicts in theCaucasus. Baev is the author of several books.

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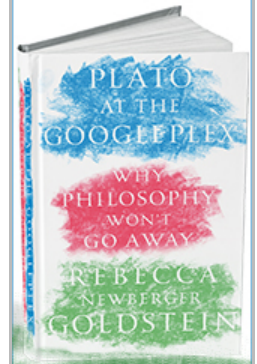
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