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## Monday, September 16, 2013

### CAVEATS TO COOLEY'S ARGUMENT

by David Lewis

I share Alex's concerns about the increasingly widespread vision of 'political stability': it leads to dangerous complacency about authoritarian states and their often violent legacies. The crisis in Syria reminds us again that almost every US foreign policy crisis of the past two decades has come through misreading the politics of authoritarian states. Central Asia is yet another region where the lure of short-term, authoritarian stability disguises the real political, social and economic challenges these countries face.

But I want to add a couple of caveats to his argument in relation to Central Asia, because I think that some of the old liberal tropes about the region need to be revisited and rescripted.

Firstly, the alternatives to the mantra of stability are not simple: rapid regime change in the Middle East has produced a real possibility of political renewal, but also mass violence, renewed authoritarianism and social and economic collapse. In the post-Soviet world, processes of regime change have also provoked civil conflict and ethnic violence. Russia and China may appear obsessed with regime stability, but both experienced 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutions that led directly to the deaths of tens of millions of people. Not surprising that they have less romantic ideas about revolution than most Americans.

And it is not only elites in Central Asia who support these discourses of stability: many ordinary people are wary of the allure of radical political change, when the outcomes are so uncertain, and alternatives not easy to identify. The choices are often between religious radicals, corrupt oligarchs in exile or marginalised secular liberals. A majority of the population certainly want more freedom, prosperity and justice, but finding viable channels to articulate and institutionalise these concerns is not easy.

None of this excuses the repression that blights so many people's lives in countries such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Managed reform is clearly the best option, but the international community has been weak in maintaining pressure for change and too willing to go along with the short-term stability that such regimes represent. As Alex argues, these authoritarian states are building up tensions that will surely make any future political development incredibly difficult and prone to conflict. But a recognition that stability is important to people who actually live in the region does highlight the need for advocates of reform to have responsible ideas on how to manage political change.

Secondly, the liberal peacebuilding agenda that Alex commends has largely been a disappointment in Central Asia. Despite years of US-funded democracy promotion projects, countries such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan regularly feature in Freedom House's annual round-up of the worst dictatorships in the world.

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Life is a bit freer in Kazakhstan, but it still doesn't have democratic elections, a legal political opposition, or a free press: the more it finds allies in the West, the more repressive it appears to become. Tajikistan's much-lauded power-sharing agreement after a bloody civil war in the 1990s did not last long: President Rahmon has gradually ousted all potential rivals from the political scene.

Only Kyrgyzstan has held competitive elections and developed more liberal political institutions, but its democratic experiment does not offer too much for neighbouring states to envy, having frequently descended into chaos and violence.

There are many reasons why the liberal project in Central Asia has failed – at least for now. But it is worth highlighting two reasons why Western ideas are discredited in the region since they are largely the fault of Western powers themselves.

One has been the problem of corruption. Alex has pointed out all the problems of Western security policies in the region. A similar story holds in economics. International institutions and foreign investors often claim to be the victims of the endemic bribery that plagues states in the region. But billions of dollars of corrupt funds have been channelled out of the region through Western banks, and into offshore zones or the luxury property markets of LA, London or Geneva. Western politicians and business partners have been too often happy to turn a blind eye to such excesses, but it associates Western policy in people's minds with the corruption of their elites.

The other problem has been a lack of consistency on values. The EU's failure to stick to its targeted sanctions after the massacre of unarmed civilians by Uzbek forces in Andijan in 2005 left it with little credibility on political issues. The EU and the US have repeatedly appeared happy to accept meaningless rhetoric as a sign of progress on human rights or political freedoms. The alternative is not a constant refrain of human rights, necessarily, but a hard-nosed consistency in responding to incidents of mass repression, and a focus on substantive and structural change rather than on rhetoric and process.

A third caveat to Alex's case is on Russia and China. Casting Russia and China as the authoritarian ogres in the camp might make liberals feel good, but it doesn't meet the lived geopolitical reality of most ordinary people in Central Asia. When it comes to economic development, the West has offered too little. For poor Uzbeks and Tajiks, the only decent prospects of employment are as labour migrants in Russia. Chinese investment in infrastructure is very welcome to truck drivers on Tajikistan's mountain roads. US assistance is too often frittered away on training, consultancies and endless seminars: more than two decades of bilateral assistance to the countries in the region has not left much of a legacy on the ground.

Alex is rightly critical of Russia's positioning in the region. Much of its foreign policy is driven by a nexus of post-colonial identity issues rather than any real appreciation of the needs of the region. Its role as a security actor offers symbolism, rhetoric and performance, but not much more. It is notoriously poor at building on what should be its soft power capacities in the region – language, media, and cultural and historical ties. Nevertheless, a consistent US policy of trying to minimise Russian presence in the region (mildly camouflaged as overt support for the independence of the Central Asian states) has been a mistake.

Russian involvement in the region is a natural result of its long-standing imperial past. And its impact is far from simply negative. Despite Putin's increasingly authoritarian stance at home, Russia still offers a more liberal environment for many Central Asians than life in Tashkent or Dushanbe. It offers access to education and international media and scholarship for Central Asians who still speak Russian. And its ability to offer jobs to young men with no prospects at home is probably the region's most important conflict prevention mechanism.

The rapid shift away from Russian influence in some states in the region has been an understandable postcolonial development. But it has not produced better governance, prosperity or freer politics. Paradoxically, the more pro-Russian a state is in Central Asia, the more liberal its internal politics. The most anti-Russian regimes in the region – Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – are also the most repressive.

So, overall, Alex and I share many of the same concerns about Western policies in the region. There needs to be a reinvented Western approach, with a new emphasis on values and economic cooperation. But such a development will also require a hard look in the mirror at what the West has achieved over the past two decades. This requires some rare humility in Brussels and Washington, and an overdue acknowledgment that much of the West's engagement in the past has been a failure, and that not all the actions of our illiberal Others in the region – Russia and China – are quite as negative as we suppose.

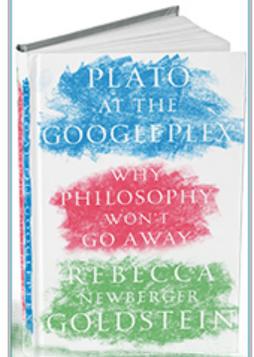
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**David Lewis** is senior lecturer at the University of Bradford in the Department of Peace Studies. He has research interests in the areas of peacebuilding, security, political change and conflict, and has

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considerable field experience in Central Asia, the Caucasus and South Asia. Before working in Bradford, David worked at the International Crisis Group in Central Asia and in Sri Lanka. His publications have focused on political change and the dynamics of authoritarian regimes in Central Asia. His recent book *The Temptations of Tyranny in Central Asia* (Hurst/Columbia University Press, 2008) examined the impact of Western policy on the region in the aftermath of 9/11. David is also an active adviser and consultant on political engagement and programming in the Caucasus and Central Asia. David has also been working on the impact of global geopolitical change on peace and conflict norms and practices. Within the same research framework, David has been awarded a British Academy grant to study shifting international norms within the OSCE and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

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