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Monday, September 16, 2013

THE ELUSIVE QUEST FOR POLITICAL STABILITY: DIVERGING APPROACHES BY THE UNITED STATES, RUSSIA, AND CHINA IN CENTRAL ASIA AND BEYOND

by Alexander Cooley

The post-Soviet region of Central Asia is frequently viewed as an arena of Great Power competition and contemporary geopolitical maneuvering. But officials from the United States, Russia and China publicly deny any rivalry, citing their shared interest in promoting regional prosperity and "stability." The latter has become a scripted trope, trotted out alongside periodic warnings that the region has the potential to become "failed," "ungoverned" or run over by militants from surrounding regions. Whatever their exact regional strategies, surely all external powers share the common goal of maintaining a stable "Central Asia."

Yet, what exactly do we mean by "political stability"? Do the regional actions of the "big three" actually match such a shared vision? And what lessons might this maneuvering among external patrons hold for other regions such as the post-Arab Spring Middle East, Africa and Southeast Asia?

My basic argument in this essay is that the public emphasis on "political stability" masks a more fundamental debate that we are reluctant to have about the underlying factors that might promote political order and responsive governance in an [increasingly multipolar world](#). This is all the more pressing in areas such as Central Asia where local strongmen agendas increasingly intersect with the security cooperation of multiple external patrons.

The most frequently used definition of stability, drawing upon [Samuel Huntington's still influential concept of "political order"](#), is the absence of political violence. But throughout the region, the term has also been used as a synonym for political loyalty, regime longevity, the durability of informal political institutions, and the need to clamp down on all forms of political opposition.

The region's "stability" has also varied by state. In small Kyrgyzstan, host to both US and Russian military facilities, has witnessed [two revolutions \(in 2005 and 2010\)](#) and a violent conflict among ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the south of the country in 2010. On the other end, Turkmenistan, outwardly, at least appears the most depoliticized, having seamlessly transitioned from the repressive personality cult of President Saparmurat Niyazov to the equally indulgent Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan have all experienced bouts of political violence, mostly because of internal grievances, though their governments have been keen to blame such outbreaks on subversive and destabilizing foreign influences. Cumulatively, external engagement has contributed to the region's "securitization" and the consolidation of power by ruling authoritarians.

But even for the United States, promoting political order has itself been secondary to maintaining the

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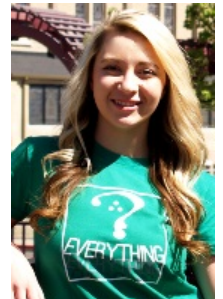
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stability of regional access and logistical arrangements necessary to support operations in neighboring Afghanistan, what we could term the pursuit of "access stability." Immediately following 9/11, the US established military bases in Karshi-Khanabad (K2) in Uzbekistan (October 2001) and the Manas airport near the capital of Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan (December 2001). In addition, it signed overflight and refueling agreements with the other Central Asian states. Most dramatically, [US troops were evicted from K2 in summer of 2005](#), in the wake of the Uzbek government's bloody crackdown against protestors in [the eastern city of Andijon](#). But US-Uzbek cooperation resumed again in 2008 when the sides negotiated a set of logistical arrangements, known as the Northern Distribution Network, as a hedge against the problems with the southern Pakistan route. Implemented by third-party commercial carriers, the road, rail and air network [spans the Eurasian landmass](#) and has since successfully delivered tens of thousands of containers across to forces in Afghanistan.

In support of NDN, US logisticians have provided extensive fees and contracts to local governments and business cronies. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, a couple of offshore-registered companies with alleged ties to two Presidential inner circles nearly monopolized the base's lucrative fuel contracts, receiving them mostly as no-bid extensions by the Pentagon even as [they ran a smuggling and re-export ring](#). According to a recent [SIGAR report](#), most of the \$1.1 billion worth of fuel used in Afghanistan between 2007-2012, mostly transited through Central Asia, may have been sourced or blended with fuel from Iran, in violation of US sanctions and without adequate recording of these transactions. The actual reporting to Congress that details NDN corruption remains classified, but [surveys of NDN commercial contractors](#) have found that demands for informal payments are widespread. This points to an inescapable irony of this messy US logistics contracting: even while US officials admit that the Afghanistan's government's legitimacy problems are rooted in its corruption and poor governance, in neighboring Central Asia US policymakers and logistics contractors have become entangled in a web of tacit deal-making and graft to support the military campaign.

The United States has also provided military aid and security cooperation to the region's militaries and security services as another form of quid pro quo, mostly conducted under the official purposes of counterterrorism and counter narcotics. The region received a significant spike in official US military assistance in 2002, but much of assistance has been routed via the unmonitored regional command CENTCOM— that retains good deal of discretionary power over the use of its funds. Investigative journalist Joshua Kucera has examined [US train and equip missions](#) may have strengthened the capabilities of elite units and special forces that were then used for domestic political purposes, most notably the [government of Tajikistan's controversial summer 2012 crackdown](#) on militias in the remote province of Gorno-Badakhshan.

Perhaps the most politically difficult relationship has been with the government of Uzbekistan. The close security ties forged by the two countries since 2001 were ruptured by the K2 eviction in 2005 and the ban in 2004 of official US military assistance due to human rights concerns. Yet, by 2008, [security cooperation had restarted](#) even while official US aid restrictions were still in effect. Indeed, Uzbekistan's [President Karimov even threatened to cut off access](#) if criticized about his country's appalling record. In 2011 the US partially lifted restrictions on US military assistance and the sides renewed negotiations over possible transfers of [US and NATO surplus military hardware from Afghanistan](#). Some have even called for Uzbekistan to host a future residual US military presence, even as diplomats from its Central Asian neighbors have repeatedly expressed their concerns that any future US military cooperation with Uzbekistan might disrupt the regional balance and further militarize an already tense set of border disputes and standoffs over regional water and resource management.

More broadly, US defense officials have also sought to help "stabilize" the region by becoming regional public goods providers. CENTCOM funded and built a new bridge between Afghanistan and Tajikistan to spur economic links between the countries. Later, defense officials argued that the [NDN itself might catalyze](#) greater regional trade and development, an aspiration that both overestimated the regional appetite for trade without the US military as a customer and analytically conflated the economic practices of rent-seeking and economic development. Most recently, the US State Department has touted a [New Silk Road](#) initiative designed to strengthen regional economic links and ties with Afghanistan.

In sum, policymakers in Washington have been unable to extricate themselves from the local politics of Central Asia, even as they sought to keep the logistics trains running smoothly. And even though the most recent [US National Intelligence Threat Assessment](#) views the primary sources of threats to the region as internal, including poor governance and political repression, in practice the lion's share of US assistance to the region still strengthens the security services of these very regimes.

For Russia, the preoccupation with regional "stability" has become a euphemism for an almost demonstrative obsession with projecting influence and procuring the public loyalty of the Central Asian regimes. The contrast with the United States on regional security issues could not be more stark: while the US is loathe to label its facilities "bases" or publicly tout its regional security cooperation, Moscow's primary objective is to conclude high-profile public agreements for classical "basing rights" in

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Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. However, when pressed on what, operationally, facilities such as the Russian airbase at Kant (just a few miles from Manas) or the 5,000 troops in Tajikistan, actually do, Russian officials and analysts, in a bout of near circular logic, describe them as their to promote regional stability.

But the external Russian military presence is arguably more important for the perceived "great power" status it affords Moscow than any actual regional objectives. As a result, Moscow's own attitudes towards the US military presence has swung wildly back and forth between partnership and rivalry. In the wake of 9/11, Russia's obsession with its own great power status actually led it to cooperate with the Western effort in Afghanistan and issue pledged partnership in the "civilizational struggle" represented by the Global War on terror. But as it later became clear that the US would not allow Moscow to mediate its growing security cooperation with the Central Asian states, the Kremlin grew increasingly concerned that US policymakers were interested in projecting regional influence in the post-Soviet space as much as stabilizing neighboring Afghanistan. When the Color Revolutions of 2003-2005, which ousted pro-Moscow leaders for more Western-oriented regimes, spread throughout the region, the Kremlin now regarded the US as an outright competitor for political influence in its former backyard, going out of its way to portray the US democratization agenda as nothing but a fig leaf for geopolitical ambitions. Tellingly, while Western governments criticized Uzbekistan's Karimov for his actions in Andijon, Moscow publicly backed the strongman's actions and welcomed him back into the Russian led Collective Security Treaty Organization.

Moscow's greatest regional humiliation came in 2009 when then Kyrgyz President Bakiyev promised that it would close Manas in change for a Russian economic assistance package during the financial crisis. In a remarkably brazen act even for the most self-serving of Central Asian dictators, Bakiyev pocketed the initial tranche of Russian assistance, but then reneged on his promise to close the base, instead renegotiating a even higher rental payment from US officials and renaming the facility a "transit center." Bakiyev's chaotic fall one year later following mass protests was aided, at least in part, by Moscow's external efforts to destabilize his standing, including running a barrage of negative stories about his cronyism and removing a critical subsidy on fuel exports which sent protesters onto the streets.

Similarly, in planning about post-2014 regional security architectures, Moscow now regards any lingering US military presence as a [barrier to its own ambitions](#) of acting as the region's security guarantor. Moreover, over the last year, Russia has embarked on a bid to [establish classic patron-client ties with the smaller states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan](#), once again in the service of promoting stability in the course of NATO's withdrawal. In the Kyrgyz case, Moscow recently pressured the Kyrgyz government not to allow the US to continue using the Manas facility past the current 2014 lease deadline, while it has pledged new assistance to the country, extended the leases its own basing installations, and acquired a number of strategic assets, including critical hydropower projects and the country's natural gas distraction network. In doing so, Russia now has severely antagonized neighbor and rival Uzbekistan, which is increasingly looking to other countries for economic and security partnership as Moscow pressures its borders via regional proxies.

Not to be forgotten is China, whose remarkable ascendancy into the region's major economic power should not camouflage that it has also been relatively successful in pursuing its security agenda under the mantra of "stability." However, Beijing's concern has been primarily stabilizing its western province of Xinjiang, and eliminating the possibility that Uighur groups or their political allies can mobilize in the neighboring Central Asian countries. China has established a new regional security organization known as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The SCO's own security mission of combatting the "3 evils" of terrorism, separatism and extremism, directly borrows from China's own security mantra, while Beijing has linked its own "strike hard" campaign in Xinjiang to the region's broader fight against transnational threats. More broadly, China's aggressive investment in Central Asian economic infrastructure underlies the belief that promoting economic development and modernization in Xinjiang's border areas will also help stabilize the restless region itself. All throughout the decade, Beijing has given rhetorical and symbolic support to Moscow about curtailing Western influence in the region and "democratizing international relations," even as [Chinese companies have broken Russia's](#) traditional regional energy monopolies.

But China's almost obsessive and immediate preoccupation with Xinjiang, masks a more fundamental divergence in regional understandings of what [produces stable and enduring political order](#). For over two decades, the Western-led liberal "peace-building" and post-conflict model has been premised upon empowering a range of international actors and non-governmental organization to build, in collaboration with local partners, a set of formal political institutions that tempers violence and conflict by addressing and mediating political grievances, upholding minority rights and ensuring religious freedom. Yet, [Beijing's emerging approach to conflict management](#) seems to rest on preventing and squelching political mobilization in the first place. This is a counter-norm that has been eagerly embraced by the

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Central Asian regimes in their pushback against what they perceive as intrusive campaigns by Western NGOs and democracy organizations.

But, despite their differing agendas and goals, is it really fair to implicate the United States, Russia and China powers in the region's bouts of tumultuous politics, especially when episodes such as the [ethnic violence in Osh](#) in 2010 or protests in [Zhanaozen](#) in Kazakhstan in 2011 had little to do with outside powers, despite government proclamations to the contrary? Here, I believe, the causal chain is less direct, but still significant. For one, this external obsession with "stability" has itself aided and abetted the region's rapid normative regression and securitization. For instance, and not coincidentally, the region has been a site where all three external powers conducted extraordinary renditions in cooperation with local security services, sending accused terrorists and extremists across regional boundaries in violation of international law. Though the US appears to have ceased its activities around 2005, Russia and China continue to do so under the legal cover of new [regional security treaties such as the SCO and the Minsk Conventions](#) that confer extra-territorial powers to security services above their [international humanitarian obligations](#). The Arab Spring has only renewed fears in Beijing and Moscow about the potential for political disorder to spread in a modular fashion, necessitating even greater scrutiny over the region's transnational social ties and growing use of social media.

Within the EU and US, emphasizing the enduring importance of "political stability" has become a convenient rhetorical exercise for avoiding a more in-depth discussion of about the origins of this normative regression and the [West's increasingly fading credibility](#) on the so-called values issues. It is also a convenient way of avoiding a broader debate about how Western assumptions of what produces economic development, political accountability and good governance clash with both the doctrines of Beijing and Moscow on these issues, as well as with the actual instrumental objectives the West has displayed in this rapidly evolving part of the world.

* * *

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