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Monday, September 16, 2013

A RESPONSE TO BAEV AND LEWIS

by Alexander Cooley

I am pleased to respond to the important points raised by Pavel Baev and David Lewis, both long-time and insightful observers of Eurasia and its rapidly changing politics.

Pavel's point about the "stability paradox" (a term he might consider patenting), or how great powers such as the United States, Russia and China actively pursue policies that ultimately undermine even their own visions of the concept, is right on target, so I will confine myself to discussing the implications of my argument for the post-Spring and current developments in Syria.

Rather than provide any one set of clear lessons, the Arab Spring and subsequent developments appear to have reinforced these varying external assumptions about the determinants of "stability." In hindsight, Western policymakers and commentators now view the 2011 upheavals as a long-term consequence of decades of political stagnation and kleptocracy, with the Tunisian spark quickly generating regional demonstration in other countries with these same characteristics.

But in practice, translating such hindsight into new Western policies has remained difficult. Indeed, the US pursued dramatically different policies towards Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and Jordan, in great part because of enduring concerns over "access stability." In Egypt, for instance, following the Egyptian military's overthrow of President Morsi and post-coup the Obama Administration has struggled mightily to reconcile its enduring need for security cooperation and access to Suez with its own legal guidelines, such as the Leahy Law, mandating aid termination.

As with US policy towards Uzbekistan, the parsing of various categories of US military assistance and activities and calls for "political engagement" in the service of encouraging incremental political reform might facilitate internal bureaucratic policy compromises, but abroad it mostly signals confusion, inconsistency and hypocrisy. Moreover, in Egypt, like in Central Asia, the political conditions accompanying assistance have become weaker still given the availability of other external patrons in the event of US aid cut-offs. As Stephen Cook of the Council on Foreign Relations has observed regarding US military assistance to Cairo, "We allegedly have influence but we never used the lever of the influence: so as a result we don't have any."

However, for Russia, China and the Central Asian rulers themselves, the Arab Spring was less a parable about the long-term dangers of political decay and institutionalized corruption, and more a lesson about the perils of social media and the perceived power of new forms of political mobilization and coordination. Indeed, following the MENA events in 2011 both the SCO and CSTO ramped up their capacity to "deal with social unrest" cyber-security, and intelligence cooperation. There are also important emerging parallels between MENA-based regional security organizations like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the CSTO and SCO. Like its Eurasian counterparts, GCC countries

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Oh, that's too bad, Norm!  
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have signed a [controversial new security pact](#) that includes provisions for extra-territorial security cooperation, renditions and political asylum denials, common blacklisting, and increased regional surveillance.

David Lewis offers some thoughtful counterpoints about the relative ineffectiveness of the "liberal peace-building" model and questions the wisdom of reflexively criticizing new Chinese and Russian assistance to the region. On his first point, I am broadly in agreement, though with the caveat that the various international actors that constitute the "liberal peace-building" establishment have contributed to their own regional inefficacy by steadily paring down the very political and human rights conditions once thought to be imperative for the success of outside interventions. David's own important research on how the OSCE, in the interest of currying favor with the ruling regimes in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, [guttered the political dimensions of its "police reform" projects](#), is a good case in point.

On the second point, David is surely right to point to some of the potential developmental benefits from Chinese aid, investment and project financing. By almost all measures, China is now the [region's leading overall economic partner](#) and the only external actor that is heavily investing in upgrading the region's infrastructure, providing desperately-needed highways, railroads, energy grids and pipelines.

But David's anecdote about Tajik truck drivers being grateful for Chinese assistance itself might reveal some of the less obvious potential adverse consequences of Beijing's economic largess. The first concerns the governance and management of these new infrastructures, and Beijing's reluctance to set conditions that deter connected local elites from turning intended public works projects into vehicles for private revenue streams. For example, just a few weeks after the Dushanbe-Chanak highway, built mainly with \$280 million of Chinese assistance, opened in 2009, a newly formed company Innovative Highway Solutions, registered in the British Virgin Islands, began operating new tollbooths. The company, with alleged ties to the ruling elite, has been [criticized for charging excessively high fees, while being exempt from almost all taxes in Tajikistan](#). In sum, the Chinese-financed project—intended as a public good by Beijing to spur regional trade and development—has been turned into a high-cost "club good" and private source of rents.

In criticizing aspects of Chinese assistance, I am not suggesting that regional projects managed by the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank or the European bank for Reconstruction and Development are not without problems, nor am I champion of Western-style conditional lending. Nevertheless, International Financial Institutions offer some channels to address such governance concerns, whereas China's lending terms in Central Asia remain opaque and Beijing still does not actively participate in international donor planning and coordination.

David's call for humility from Brussels and Washington is sound advice- I couldn't agree more. But as he and Pavel have argued in this forum and elsewhere, this is a region that seems to nurture just the opposite, as external powers all too readily project their own grand strategic visions, assumptions and regional blueprints. In that spirit, interrogating the "stability obsession" reveals more about the pathologies of the external powers themselves than the politics they are intended to "stabilize."

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**Alexander Cooley** is Professor of Political Science at Barnard College. He is also a Doctoral Dissertation Sponsor in Columbia University's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, a Faculty Member of The Harriman Institute, Saltzman Institute for War and Peace Studies, and teaches at the School of International and Public Affairs. Cooley is the author of four academic books: [Logics of Hierarchy: The Organization of Empires, States and Military Occupations](#) (Cornell 2005; cowinner of the [2006 Marshall Shulman Prize](#)); [Base Politics: Democratic Change and the US Military Overseas](#) (Cornell 2008, Reviews: [JFQ](#), [APSR](#), [PSQ](#), and [Military Review](#)); and [Contracting States: Sovereign Transfers in International Relations](#) (Princeton 2009), co-authored with Hendrik Spruyt of Northwestern University. Cooley latest book examines the multipolar politics of US-Russia-China competition for influence in Central Asia--[Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest for Central Asia](#) (Oxford [2012](#)).

*To leave a comment, please go to the introduction to the DAG-3QD Peace and Justice Symposium, of which this essay is a part, [here](#).*

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