

Great Game, Local Rules and the New Great Power Context in Central Asia

By Alexander Cooley
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REVIEWED BY JOHN HERBST

In *Great Game, Local Rules the New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*, Alexander Cooley develops an excellent analytical framework for looking at the activities of China, Russia and the United States in Central Asia. Cooley offers three broad arguments. First, he observes that the three big powers have pursued different goals in Central Asia, which has meant that their interests do not necessarily conflict. China's main objective has been to stabilize Xinjiang by ensuring cooperative relationships on Xinjiang's border. This prompted Beijing to resolve border disputes with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan on favorable terms for its Central Asian neighbors. The U.S. has sought to stabilize Afghanistan by establishing supply and base arrangements in Central Asia. Despite the ups and downs with Tashkent which led to the closing of the U.S. base at Karshi Khanabad in 2005, Washington has largely achieved its objectives in the region. Russia has sought to remain the major power or hegemon in the region. Despite this ambitious goal, Moscow has been willing to accept efforts

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by the U.S. to establish bases in Central Asia because it also is interested in containing, if not defeating the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Cooley's second point is a corollary to the first. Even as competition among the three in Central Asia has intensified in the past decade, it has not become a zero sum game. Given the differing objectives of the parties, the great powers have not seen a need to try to expel one another from the region.

Cooley's third point is one that international relations scholars long ago spotted in relations between great and small states. With the three powers vying for influence in Central Asia, the local states can pick and choose among them, accepting what meets their needs, rejecting what they do not want. This means increased leverage for the locals.

Politics of the American bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan provide good examples of local leverage. President Karimov was delighted to provide the U.S. a base at Karshi Khanabad in 2001 to help conduct its operations in Afghanistan. But tensions in the bilateral relationship over such issues as human rights and internal reform came to a head in 2005, following Washington's criticism of Uzbekistan's crackdown in Andijon and the "Colored Revolution" in Kyrgyzstan which overthrew President Akayev. Turning to the Russians at that time, Karimov kicked the United States out of Karshi Khanabad. Yet a few years later, loathe to get too close to the Russians, Karimov was ready to partner with the United States in delivering supplies to Afghanistan through the Northern Distribution Network.

Cooley also provides a thorough account of Russian, Kyrgyz and American maneuverings surrounding the 2009 renewal of the agreement for the U.S. to use Manas airbase to supply Afghanistan. In brief, Moscow offered then Kyrgyz President Bakiyev various economic

incentives to close Manas to American use. Bakiyev used this offer to negotiate more generous terms for using Manas. Considering themselves betrayed, Russia used its media presence in Kyrgyzstan to weaken Bakiyev, who was driven from power in yet another “Colored Revolution” in 2010.

An important theme that emerges from Cooley’s analysis is the rise of China in Central Asia. He points out that by 2008 China had surpassed Russia as Central Asia’s leading economic partner. China may have initially turned to Central Asia in order to help pacify Xinjiang, but its economic dynamism and focus on long term interests are making it the major outside player in the region. Of particular importance is China’s investment in oil and gas pipelines from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to China. In addition to helping China secure hydrocarbons for its growing economy, these investments have been decisive in breaking Russia’s near monopoly control over the marketing of Central Asian energy.

I have one bone to pick with the author or, more likely, the publisher of this excellent book. That is, the title, or more precisely the use of the phrase the “great game.” In point of fact, the original “great game” – the shadow war between Britain and Russia in the 19th century -- was not so great. It was a geopolitical backwater, as the major arena of international diplomacy was in Europe and then, with the emergence of Japan in the late 19th century, also the Far East. When Russia and Great Britain faced a major geopolitical challenge – the rise of Germany – they reconciled their “great game” differences with the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907.

Living in an age of public relations, we can understand how the Great Game came by its reputation. It had excellent publicists – British military officers who knew how to write and, of

course, Rudyard Kipling. It also had an interesting story to tell and an exotic locale. But the great game of nations was played elsewhere in the 19th century. What was true in the 19th century is no less true today. Central Asia is a fascinating region where major powers have legitimate interests. In pursuit of those interests they interact and even find points of friction. But Central Asia is not the primary place of their interaction. The current debate in Washington is whether it was premature for the Obama Administration to move its strategic focus from the Middle East (and Europe) to East Asia. The issues that dominate the international agenda today are not in Central Asia. This is not to say that Central Asia was never the central arena in international affairs. From the 6th century establishment of the Turkic Khanates, through the establishment by Ghengis Khan of a Pax Mongolica to the emergence of Tamerlane in the 1th century, Central Asia was often the greatest game. **PRISM**