Synopsis of Alexander Cooley’s Presentation: “The Price of Access: Washington’s Costly Central Asian Detour on the Way to Afghanistan”

Author of the recently published Great Games, Local Rules, Professor Alexander Cooley of Barnard College and Columbia University gave a thorough overview of the actors and tensions within and in the vicinity of Central Asia. He marked Central Asian affairs as the “behind the curtain” dynamic in Afghanistan and examined how the Central Asian Republics are an arena of multipolar politics by giving an overview of the influence of U.S., Chinese, and Russian strategy in the region.

Professor Cooley started by explaining how all of the interactions in Central Asia, not just competitive interactions, have intensified between the United States, Russia, and China have intensified since 2001. He also noted that the establishment of foreign military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan was central to military involvement in Afghanistan operations. For instance, all U.S. military personnel going to Afghanistan from the U.S. would first pass through the Manas military base in Kyrgyzstan. The 2008 U.S. installment of the Northern Distribution Network, the channel through which goods were funneled into Afghanistan, allowed supplies to be let into Afghanistan at Termez bypassing Pakistan. This aided the U.S. effort in Afghanistan because Pakistan had been the site of significant distribution disruptions in the past.

He followed this analysis of U.S. actions by looking at China’s and Russia’s Central Asian interests. Professor Cooley noted that Central Asia initially sparked Chinese interest because they wanted to stabilize the Chinese western province of Xinjiang and quell separatist sentiment there. The logic behind the Chinese strategy was that if Xinjiang’s neighbors were more prosperous, it would quell nationalism, secure a Central Asian energy supply, and bolster the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). In this region, China hoped to multilateralize its activities to reassure its neighbors.

While China and the U.S. have clear military and political interests in the Central Asian region, Russia’s involvement is more social and cultural in nature. Central Asia’s history of Soviet occupation has led Russia today to look to the region as a place where it should have a privileged position. Russia’s leaders want to establish their authority to speak on behalf of the region and push back against western norms. They also want to maintain access for strategic industries and create new regional organizations that can institutionalize their regional power. Between 2001 and 2011, Russia’s strategy of multi-vectorism, or serving as external patrons by having a relative power equilibrium between all Central Asian states, proved rather weak. U.S. efforts initially proved more successful than Russia’s weak strategy as they achieved the access they were looking for through negotiations. However, U.S. soft power as a values promoter declined as the impression of a double standard was solidified. Rising hypocrisy costs caused the U.S. to lose regional credibility.

During much of this period, the Central Asian Republics evoked competition between the United States and Russia so that they could play one power off another. While Kazakhstan pursued some integration with Russia, they also hoped to maintain a diversified set of clients for the energy resources. This strategy was encapsulated in their foreign policy slogan “happiness is in multiple pipelines.” Uzbekistan has shifted its orientation from being toward Russia, to the United States, to independence. Turkmenistan has sought various external energy partners. Tajikistan has started implementing an open door policy with Russia but also participated in the Northern Distribution Network to curry favor with the United States. Kyrgyzstan hosted both U.S. and Russian troops.

In light of the 2014 U.S.-NATO troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russia, China and the U.S. are reorienting their overall strategies in Central Asia. Russia has ceased efforts to be “all things, to all countries,” and is now looking at specific weaker states where they can gain control. Its former “unite and influence” role as a mediator has became a “divide and rule” role by trying to lock in support of these weaker states by representing their interests in local and regional disputes. China is beginning to move westward in their foreign policy efforts as a counter to the U.S. They want to consolidate and increase energy commodities since they have already built a gas and oil pipeline. China also seeks to increase its role as a lender providing emergency assistance to Central Asia. The U.S. will look to terminate their contract with Kyrgyzstan for the Manas Air Base, the main logistics and transit center for operations in Afghanistan. This will concurrently terminate regional fuel contracts because Manas consumes a great deal of aviation fuel. All these changes challenge the regional equilibrium.

If the U.S. decides on the ‘zero option’ in Afghanistan, no official forces can remain in Central Asia. Instead the U.S. will have to hold military influence through drone usage, special forces operations, and containing Russia and Crimea. U.S. exit will also affect the capital inflow into the region and possibly hinder the development of Afghanistan post-war. Leaving military bases in Kyrgyzstan will allow the country to become a Russian client state. Despite Russia’s growing power in the region Dr. Cooley argued that Russia will increasingly defer to Chinese economic hegemony. He ended by saying that this transitional phase is likely, at least in the near term, to increase insecurity and uncertainty across the region.