



Photo by Asiya Khaki,
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GREAT GAMES, LOCAL RULES, AND THE SHIFTING DYNAMICS OF A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

BY MASHA
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AN INTERVIEW WITH ALEXANDER COOLEY

Why we should pay more attention to Central Asia.

The Harriman Institute's Alexander Cooley, Tow Professor for Distinguished Scholars and Practitioners in Political Science at Barnard College, published his fourth book, *Great Games, Local Rules*, in June 2012. The title alludes to the “great game” portrayed by Rudyard Kipling during the nineteenth century, when Russia and Great Britain struggled for control over Central Asia. But the new “great game” described by Cooley is of a different nature—the regional interests of Russia, China, and the United States don't necessarily contradict one another; instead, the countries often cooperate in their dealings with Central Asian states, which, unlike the Central Asia of Kipling's time, are sovereign and have established their own “local rules” that they use to manipulate the “great powers.”

The book emerged from Cooley's work as an inaugural Global Fellow at the Open Society Foundations (OSF) from 2009 to 2010, where he studied the impact of the Shanghai

Cooperation Organization (SCO) on regional integration in Central Asia. Since the end of his fellowship at OSF, Cooley has been serving on the Advisory Board for the OSF's Central Eurasia Project (CEP), which examines cross-regional issues such as the inner workings of Western military arrangements there and the human rights implications of security assistance (in 2012, he also joined the Advisory Committee of Human Rights Watch, Europe and Central Asia Division). In February, CEP partnered with the Harriman Institute on a half-day conference titled, “Uzbekistan in a Time of Uncertainty: Domestic and Regional Trends.” In April, as an offshoot from the chapter of his book that deals with corruption, Cooley organized another conference at the Harriman Institute (this time independently of the CEP) titled, “Central Asia's Hidden Offshore Ties: The Politics of Money-Laundering and Virtual State-Building.”

Currently, he is working to turn *Great Games, Local Rules* into a 4000-level course titled “Politics of a Post-Western World.” It will be introduced next spring.



We're so accustomed to looking at Central Asia as this region that harks back to the past; instead we should think about it as a window on the future.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a prevailing sentiment that Central Asia would be a blank slate, “a space ripe for new conquering influences and ideas.” Can you explain why this didn’t turn out to be the case?

Alexander Cooley: In retrospect, the 1990s, certainly the early- to mid-1990s, were notable more for documenting our ignorance of the area than anything else. There really was a scramble to try and influence the identities and orientations of these states. The West saw Central Asia as a region ripe for democracy promotion and transition and lumped the countries together with the East-European countries, assuming that they would gradually become more Western and adopt Western-style institutions. The East also had its interests. Japan was heavily involved as a donor; Turkey was involved, especially culturally, opening schools; even the Saudis were there in various capacities, trying to promote Islam.

What very few people caught at the time was that the Central Asian governments were carefully laying the foundation to consolidate their own power. They were paying lip service to things like democracy and elections, because they wanted international

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acceptance, and signed the universal human rights treaties, but in reality they were consolidating, building their security services, creating monopolies over lucrative assets and businesses, and forging states and identities to go with them. This happened almost under the radar, and by the late ’90s and early 2000s, when we had renewed external interest in the region, all of these rulers were quite comfortable in their skins and successfully managing their internal politics.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: This resulted in the “local rules” you refer to in the title of your book. Can you tell me more about these “rules” and how they have shaped Central Asia’s relationship with Russia, China, and the United States, the primary players with external interest in the region?

Alexander Cooley: Local elites use the external interest to consolidate their political power, on the one hand, and enrich themselves on the other. They push back on political conditions and human rights demands, while taking advantage of geopolitical interests and opportunities. For example, they are demanding military equipment and increased assistance from the U.S. and NATO as they exit Afghanistan.

I devote a chapter in my book to what I call “Kyrgyzstan’s base-bidding war.” President Bakiyev orchestrated a bidding war between the U.S. and Russia. The U.S. had been paying \$17 million a year, as well as up to \$150 million in aid and assistance, to use the base. Then, in February 2009, Bakiyev announced that the base was unpopular and that he was going to shut it down. At the same conference, Medvedev announced that Russia was going to provide Kyrgyzstan with \$2 billion economic “anticrisis” assistance. And so, U.S. officials scrambled behind the scenes, sent delegations, and tried to renegotiate a new deal. In essence they did; the base was renamed a transit center, and the rent went up from \$17 million to \$63 million. Now we know that the deal was redone shortly after Kyrgyzstan received the first \$300 million, wired from Moscow, which went to Asia Universal Bank. A year later, after Bakiyev was ousted from power, it turned out that Asia Universal Bank was like an empty cupboard, and that they took the funds that came from the Russian Federation as part of this bidding war, and sent them into a web of offshore bank accounts and networks. So, there was a pretty blatant attempt by Bakiyev to use this external interest to enrich himself and his close family circle. Global Witness documented this in its recent report, “Grave Secrecy.” That’s one example. [You can find the report on www.globalwitness.org.]

There are others I talk about: the Giffen affair—Jim Giffen was a famed broker who put together a number of Western oil deals with the Kazakh government in the 1990s and was charged by the U.S. Department of Justice for violating the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act and for money laundering. I also discuss some Chinese deals, and the structure of the contracts, which helps to ingratiate the Chinese with part of Kazakhstan’s ruling circle. The scandals are regular throughout the region, and we see them time and time again with external funds. Whether they are funds from fuel contracts the U.S. is providing to Chinese energy companies, or as in a recent scandal with IMF [International Monetary Fund] loans in Tajikistan, where hundreds of millions have been diverted by the former central bank head to his family’s agriculture enterprises, this abuse of external flows comes up all the time.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: Russia, China, and the United States put up with a lot of these “local rules” in order to realize their own agenda; what is each of them trying to accomplish in the region?

Alexander Cooley: The interesting thing is that for the most part, Russia, China, and the United States all want different things there, so even though the interactions have become more intense over the last ten years, they’ve mostly coexisted. There’s been some competition, a lot of mimicry . . .

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: What do you mean by mimicry?

Alexander Cooley: Certain countries are trying to emulate the form if not the substance of others. For instance, traditionally the OSCE [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe] has monitored elections in the region according to a set of monitoring

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procedures, a UN code of guidelines, and so forth. Well, around the early 2000s the Central Asian states became sick of the negative criticism they were receiving from the OSCE, so they decided to support the creation of both CIS- [Commonwealth of Independent States] sponsored and SCO-sponsored election monitors. I call them phony election monitors. They started sending monitors to every Central Asian election since 2005, and their assessments of Central Asian elections are far more positive.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: So, they coexist with the Western entities?

Alexander Cooley: Right, they coexist with the OSCE, and a lot of people have said that the CSTO [Collective Security Treaty Organization] is building its security organization consciously as a counter to NATO. Or that the Customs Union, now Eurasia Union, proposed by Vladimir Putin, is trying to emulate the EU in the region. There is a lot of emulation. But for the most part, the three countries have had different goals. For the U.S., the primary goal has been Central Asia in service to the military mission in Afghanistan. That's meant setting up military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan—the U.S. was evicted from Uzbekistan in 2005—and since 2008, setting up supply lines, the so-called “Northern option,” to avoid the troubled lines in Pakistan and bring in material for troops in Afghanistan [from] all across Eurasia. And now, as they're exiting Afghanistan, the northern route to leave Afghanistan has increasingly become an object of negotiation.

China's concern is less Afghanistan, more its troubled Western Province of Xinjiang. It views Central Asia, and especially the countries that border Central Asia, as vital for Xinjiang's stability, particularly for clamping down on the activities of Uighur separatists, and trying to develop and modernize the whole perimeter surrounding Xinjiang. The assumption here is that if there are economic opportunities in the region, Xinjiang itself will become more stable, more prosperous, more integrated. And of course, China is interested in the raw materials from Central Asia, especially the gas, the pipelines. It's built two pipelines very quickly—one, an oil pipeline that traverses Kazakhstan, and the other, a natural gas pipeline that originates in Turkmenistan and flows eastward.





Russia is a little more complicated. It's a common assumption that Russia wants to reconstitute the Soviet Union. I don't think that's true. The 1990s signified a pause as Russia itself was recovering and transitioning. Then, over time, the interest in Central Asia increased. Russia doesn't want any single material thing; it doesn't have a strategy the way China and the U.S. do. Russia wants to be acknowledged for its status in the region. It wants to be deferred to as the "privileged power," as Medvedev said after the Georgia War. It wants to be deferred to, it wants to be consulted, it wants to speak on behalf of the Central Asians. In part, Russia views Central Asia as a means to justify its own "great power" status, a demonstration of its sphere of influence, a way to justify things like its seat on the Security Council. So that's why we see, what I term in the book, "schizophrenic behavior."

For instance, after the attacks of 9/11—people forget this—Vladimir Putin was the first world leader to call President Bush.

I call it "authoritarian log-rolling." There was certainly a sense that the West had not kept its end of the bargain.

He talked about confronting a common civilizational challenge and pledged support. He offered facilities- and intelligence-sharing in support of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. But he did this assuming that the U.S. would work through him, and Russia would mediate the U.S.'s role as a senior partner. Instead, over the next couple of years, it became clear that the U.S. was dealing with these countries bilaterally without consulting Russia. In fact, it started to provide military assistance to these countries, and Special Forces training, among other things. And as the U.S.-Russian relationship deteriorated anyway, as a result of the Iraq war, and the ABM Treaty [Anti-Ballistic Missile], and so forth, by 2003 Russia began to perceive the U.S. presence in Central Asia as threatening.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: And Russia was counting on some security assistance in the Caucasus . . .

Alexander Cooley: That's right; Russia figured that everyone's security concerns would be lumped together, and that this would be acknowledged. And in fact, they got this from China. One of the interesting things I show in the book is that as the region became securitized by all three powers; there was this kind of ratcheting up of who was and wasn't considered to be a security threat. We heard Chinese-Russian proclamations that China recognized the problem of terrorism and separatism in Chechnya, and Russia recognized China's territorial integrity. I call it "authoritarian log-rolling." There was certainly a sense that the West had not kept its end of the bargain.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: Then the Russian-U.S. relationship was further strained by the placement of missiles in Eastern Europe and the Color Revolutions.

Alexander Cooley: Absolutely, yes. So, missile defense was a big one that broke down Russian-U.S. relations. And the Color Revolutions were huge, because they fused Russia's geopolitical fears about Western encroachment and the West's outspoken normative commitments to promoting democracy. The revolutions in

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Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan happened in the context of the Bush administration's freedom agenda, during the regime change in Iraq. There was the sense that the idea of “democratization” was just a Trojan horse for the U.S.’s toppling of governments and regimes. And at that point, all of these external actors supported by the West came to be coded and viewed as security threats.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: So this sentiment really solidified the Shanghai Cooperation Organization . . .

Alexander Cooley: Exactly—very much so. The SCO started to become a counter-Western vehicle—even though the Chinese didn't want it perceived as such—Russia viewed it as a way to counter Western influence, and the Central Asian countries started closing down NGOs, enacting new restrictions, at about the same time that Russia did. They broadened their sense of what constitutes a security threat—pretty much anything that's in opposition to a Central Asian regime now gets coded as a security threat. So it's this total push back against the West, and that's one of the things I try and show in the book—that a lot of this wasn't necessarily intentional on the part of Western policymakers, but their various modes of engagement came to be perceived with great suspicion. And also, they were cynical of the U.S. on a lot of these issues, especially democracy and human rights, particularly in light of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: You mentioned in the introduction to your book that you initially set out to study the SCO, which was expected to rise and come to rival Western organizations, but then the competition between Russia and China intensified after the financial crisis and the Russia-Georgia war, and this halted the organization's progress. Can you explain what happened?

Alexander Cooley: Originally I was fascinated by the SCO as a vehicle for counternorms, counter-Western organizations, and architectures. For instance, the SCO had plans to create a regional development bank, which was clearly a parallel to the World Bank and the IMF. It also had plans to create youth programs and an educational exchange—a clear counter to Western-sponsored youth programs installed in the region—that would very much build on the Nashi model.

After the financial crisis, the real differential in economic power between Russia and China emerged. Russia was one of the countries hardest hit by the financial crisis; its stock market plunged by more than 70 percent; it retracted a lot of its investments and commitments in the region. At this point China made its move, using the crisis as an opportunity to invest there. It made big loans for energy deals with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and opened up a gas pipeline, and its official trade with Central Asia crossed Russia. Russia had always been suspicious of economic integration for fear of China, and this is when it really started dragging its feet on the nonsecurity agenda and stalled the momentum for integration. Russia wanted to maintain a security agenda as a forum for eschewing anti-Western proclamations but did not want to enable the Chinese to conduct free trade and move forth with economic integration.

The other factor you pointed out is the Georgia War, which is really interesting. It tells us a lot about who really runs the SCO. Just a few weeks after the Georgia War [August 2008], there was an SCO summit in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. Russia had just recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Medvedev went to the SCO summit in the hope, according to the Russian journalists I spoke with, of trying to get the Kazakhs and the

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Kyrgyz to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia too. Because of Xinjiang, the Chinese are adamantly opposed to any separatist sentiment, especially within Eurasia. So they stiffened their backbone, and it was quite humiliating for Medvedev because he got nothing, even though the purpose of the trip was to solidify recognitions.

A year later, when there were big riots and ethnic violence in Ürümqi, in Xinjiang every single SCO member, including Moscow, signed off on a statement of support for Chinese actions—drafted by the Chinese MFA [Ministry of Foreign Affairs]—within twenty-four hours. This showed that the security agenda is really more the Chinese security agenda than the Russian one. Sometimes they coincide, but in this case, when Russia really needed something, the Chinese said no way. And that tends to be the Russian-Chinese

relationship. There is an outer veil that they have this alliance, but when you dig a little deeper, you find very heavy economic competition, and while Russia is interested in countering the West, China is always more hesitant to do so.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: In your recent ForeignPolicy.com article, “The League of Authoritarian Gentlemen,” you said that the SCO member states have been banding together across borders to fight opposition movements within their own countries. What’s been happening?

Alexander Cooley: The SCO has been really effective at the so-called “internal security” agenda. There is an increasing institutionalization of a number of activities that go against international norms and established human rights conventions. One of them is an SCO antiterror treaty signed in 2009, which, by article, gives member states the right to conduct criminal investigations on the territories of other states while bypassing extradition and asylum procedures. A state can request a suspect with no standard of probable cause or proof of misdeed—you could just be handed over. This is increasingly invoked in the region, and there are two main vectors: Central Asians being sent home, sometimes abducted from Russia and returned to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and Uighurs and some Falun Gong being sent from Russia to China. But there have also been some inter-Central Asian cases—accused extremists going from Kazakhstan to Uzbekistan and so forth. For me, this is an example of the innovation of the SCO, perhaps not in the way we want, because it’s an attempt to displace established international law in the justification of regional security cooperation.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: How should the West counter this? Is there a way for the West to counter this?

Alexander Cooley: I think the West has to call them out. A lot of people are saying that this is a self-righteous position, that the West has its problems too, and my response is: I’m an equal opportunity criticizer. My book has a section on comparative renditions that compares what the CIA did in places like Uzbekistan—and there has been more and more news about that lately—with what China and Russia have done there.

When you engage with the SCO, you can’t just focus on the common nonvalues stuff, because then you legitimize the other things.

Bracketing the values agenda tends to marginalize its importance. For example, the EU has established something called the “Human Rights Dialogue” with all of the Central Asian countries as part of its strategy in the region. Well, that sounds good. It tells us that the EU is engaged in human rights dialogue. But, the problem is that now, any discussion of human rights or civil society has been relegated to the “dialogue.” So, you don’t have to bring up these

issues at high-level meetings because there is a separate “dialogue” for them. It’s almost a way of sequestering them, as opposed to integrating them into the whole agenda.

We should be asking these countries, who is on your black list of extremists? What are the procedures of listing and delisting? Are they in accordance with UN norms? These are all things that can be brought up. I’m not advising that we shun the SCO, or ignore it, but all of these issues should be on the table when engaging with it. But, there’s not a lot of appetite for that.

The other trend I see with both Russia and China is their growing influence in now established UN committees, especially the human rights committee. Russia, for example, introduced this

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horrid bill in September, which passed, on declaration of traditional values—a bill that provides cover for national antigay and lesbian legislation. We now see such legislation making its way through the Duma. There’s also another draft bill Moscow is circulating, that’s also publicly available, about the need to reform the monitoring treaties in the interest of making them more “effective”—but as worded the bill would actually gut rigorous external monitoring and make it less intrusive.

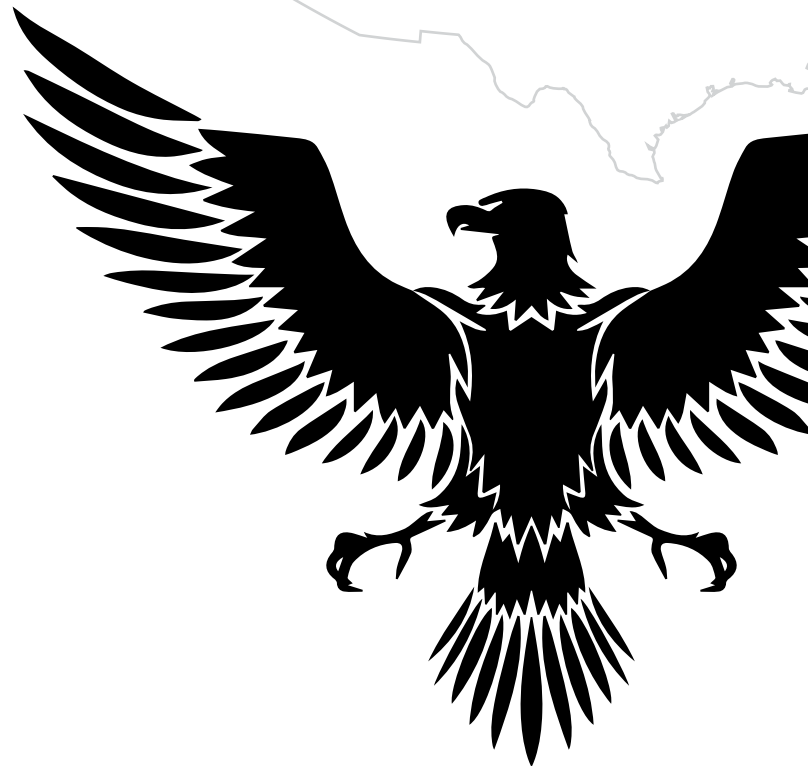
The West can’t assume that because our Helsinki-era institutions and norms are in place that they’re going to endure. We have to respond to these challenges, recognizing that perceptions of Western hypocrisy hurt our ability to strengthen human rights law against challenges from the SCO or other bodies that wish to carve out regional exceptions or create more culturally-specific standards of democracy and human rights. But, especially in Central Asia, our preoccupation with Afghanistan has led to a desire to engage these regional forums relatively uncritically.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: So security is trumping other issues.

Alexander Cooley: Definitely.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: Has U.S. strategy in the region changed during the Obama administration?

Alexander Cooley: There’s been an attempt to try and use the reset to sort of ensure Russian cooperation on Afghanistan routes both in terms of the Northern Distribution Network and Manas. That has been a relative success, but there was a lot of anger in Kyrgyzstan after Bakiyev fell from the interim government because of the perception that the U.S. supported Bakiyev. Because of its



interest in the base, the U.S. toned down its criticisms of many of Bakiyev's excesses. But there is also a growing sense that this isn't the U.S.'s neighborhood; this is China and Russia's neighborhood. Russia is the security player and China is the economic player. As the U.S. exits Afghanistan, I think the tension between Russia and China is going to increase.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: So, you think the new, *new* "great game" is going to be between Russia and China?

Alexander Cooley: Yes. The West will continue to have a limited presence in places like Uzbekistan, it will continue to conduct Special Forces operations, and counterterrorism, and so forth, but Russian-Chinese economic competition will magnify, and some other players will enter: India, South Korea, Turkey . . . once again sort of reengaging. Not having the West around should take away some of the bargaining leverage that the Central Asian states have traditionally had.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: Will Central Asian states be more likely to succumb to the demands of Russia and China?

Alexander Cooley: Yes. I think their bargaining leverage is definitely going to be weakened, once the U.S. becomes less dependent on them for security issues, and thus ceases to be present as an obvious regional patron. But, we'll see; we also have to see what the size of the footprint in Afghanistan will be, what logistical arrangements are being made to support them involving the Central Asian states.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: What are the implications for the rest of the world once the U.S. steps out?

Alexander Cooley: I'm not sure there are implications directly. In the book I emphasize that we're so accustomed to looking at Central Asia as this region that harks back to the past; instead we should think about it as a window on the future. I call it an example of a multipolar region. And the multipolar world is messy. It challenges Western authority, it's got numerous actors, doing lots of things, some effectively, some not . . .



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