



Freeman Chair in China Studies

費和中國研究講座

Event Summary

China's Emergence in Central Asia: Security, Diplomatic, and Economic Interests

Forum One: The Current State of China-Central Asia Diplomacy and Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy

Wednesday, February 5, 2003

Overview

In our first forum on China's emergence in Central Asia, four different speakers presented a broad overview of this developing relationship, focusing on its historic origins, recent changes, and implications for the future. Former National Security Advisor and CSIS Counselor Zbigniew Brzezinski established the historical context and significance of the Central Asian region and how it has and will continue to affect Chinese, Russian, and United States strategic thinking. Dr. David Finkelstein, Director of Project Asia at the CNA Corporation, detailed past interactions between China and Central Asia, going as far back as pre-modern times, and linked China's past interests to its current goals in the region, including its involvement in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Dr. Fiona Hill, a Fellow at the Brookings Institution, followed with a discussion of how Russia and Central Asia are evolving in the post-Soviet and post- 9/11 world and how foreign policy and national interest changes have created a new framework in Central Asia. Lastly, Mr. Richard Hoagland, Director of the Office of Caucasus and Central Asian Affairs at the State Department, described U.S. relations in Central Asia and catalogued the many challenges affecting the future development of the region, both politically and in terms of a lasting security structure.

Zbigniew Brzezinski

Dr. Brzezinski began by recounting how Central Asia came within the Russian sphere of influence since Tsarist times, and how the region has now begun to emerge as an independent, strategically significant area. He highlighted the major geostrategic implications for China's new role in Central Asia, noting that China is returning to the region in a significant way for the first time since the Mongol Dynasty. This represents an acknowledgement that Russia can no longer play an exclusive role in the region. Dr. Brzezinski underlined the centrality of this

interplay between Russia and China to the future of the region and to the issues raised in this project.

Dr. Brzezinski also stated his suspicion that American involvement in the region will continue only to the extent that there is an American stake in a Central Asia – defined in Washington to include Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to some extent Iran. He added that Russia's role is receding, especially on the political level, as well as culturally and economically. This is a result of all the problems Russia faces internally, such as depopulation, social crisis and lagging industrial reform, even though Russia remains omnipresent in the region in terms of history and immediacy. For example, he pointed out that Central Asians are learning English at an accelerated rate, not as an act of deference to the United States, but as an acknowledgement of new international realities.

On the other hand, China's influence is growing fast. He noted, though, that its position is not yet dominant in any country, or even comparable to either the Russians by tradition and history, or the very visible and captivating American presence. It is growing, he explained, because new routes of trade, such as pipelines, highways, and railroads are tying Central Asia to the world and are having the effect of increasing China's involvement and physical presence which is already quite evident when one visits the market places in major Central Asian cities. China is emerging now as the most powerful and dynamic, immediate neighbor of Central Asia. Just as Russia's role is receding, China's is growing. Dr. Brzezinski predicted that in the future China would become increasingly preeminent in the region compared with both Russia and the United States. As a consequence, Central Asian nations may engage Russia as a balancer, but China could become, in the longer run, a dominating presence. Its economy is already five times larger than Russia's and the "Go West" campaign is a significant indication of China's aspirations in the region.

Dr. Brzezinski concluded that the interplay of China, Russia, and the United States will be dominated increasingly by the topic of this project: China's emergence in Central Asia. In summing up, he noted that political realities in Central Asia might be seen just by looking at street signs: in 1997, one of the leading boulevards in Bishkek – the Lenin Prospekt – had had a large section renamed to the Deng Xiaoping Prospekt.

During the question and answer session, Dr. Brzezinski noted that the United States is in a relatively favorable position because the expansion of Chinese influence in Central Asia will likely be gradual, skillfully executed, and would not precipitate conflict. The United States will be favorably positioned between Russia and China: one whose influence is receding, but whose influence, in its residual fashion, may actually even be more attractive to Central Asian countries because it will be less threatening; and the other whose influence is rising, but whose ambitions may make the Central Asian states nervous. Dr. Brzezinski highlighted this point by noting his surprise at the alacrity with which the Central Asian leaders responded to 9/11. Contrary to the widely accepted but incorrect perception in the United States, it was not Putin who either invited or permitted the United States permission to go into Central Asia. In fact, it was the leaders of Central Asian countries who immediately offered their assistance. Overall, Dr. Brzezinski believed that U.S. interests, by and large, are probably benefiting from the fact that instead of monolithic control over the region, we are going to have a more complicated set of bilateral relationships between an expanding indirect Chinese influence and receding but less threatening Russian presence.

Also, Dr. Brzezinski noted that Pakistani leaders overestimate India's influence in the region and that there is little room in Central Asia for India to expand influence. Lastly, he

stated his calculation that China is not overly concerned or fearful with the rise in Islamic fundamentalism beyond its border. By and large, it is confident that it can stop its spread into China.

David Finkelstein

Dr. Finkelstein provided a comprehensive historical overview on Chinese interests in Central Asia, and linked these past interests to current Beijing policy in the region. He began by noting two prominent examples which illustrate current Chinese involvement in Central Asia: China's leadership in creating the SCO, in partial defiance of Deng Xiaoping's dictum that, "in international affairs China should keep a low profile and avoid taking the lead," and China's October 2002 military exercise with the Kyrgyz military, the first combined exercise in the history of the PRC. Dr. Finkelstein then went on to describe how China has had a threefold interest in Central Asia since ancient times: ensuring physical security along China's frontier borders with Central Asia, ensuring that no empire hostile to China occupied the Central Asian steppes or the river valley oases, and ensuring that China had unfettered access to the natural resources of the region. These policies in the past led to what Dr. Finkelstein termed one of the first "clash of civilizations" between China and its neighbors in Central Asia.

This troubled history led to China's use of what Dr. Finkelstein referred to as the "Three Cs" to secure Beijing's three enduring national security interests along its Central Asia frontier: co-opting, conquering, and colonizing. This strategy often meant "legitimizing" local kingdoms in Central Asia, conquering their territory outright, or Sinification of the indigenous peoples. During the Cold War and the Sino-Soviet rivalry, all of China's key security interests in Central Asia were challenged: China's western border was under direct threat, an empire hostile to China controlled nearly all of Central Asia, and Beijing had almost no access at all to the resources of the region.

The end of the Cold War allowed China and Russia to settle many of their border disputes and security differences. However, China's border with Central Asia and its interest in Xinjiang still generated numerous concerns. Among them, Dr. Finkelstein noted: fears of Kazak nationalism among Chinese citizens; the Pan-Turkic movement and the Xinjiang Uyghur minority; the rise of militant Islam as a general phenomenon; and incidents of provincial violence and acts of domestic sabotage in the decade of the 1990s that the Chinese claim were the work of "Xinjiang separatists." Moreover, China was also concerned with a growing U.S. and NATO presence in the region well before 9/11. These concerns came in the context of declining U.S.-China relations and were exemplified by NATO's Partnership for Peace program with the Central Asian states and the U.S. 82nd Airborne exercise CENTRAZBAT in Kazakhstan in 1997.

Dr. Finkelstein concluded that that these conditions led China to take the lead in forming the Shanghai Five consultative group that later evolved into the SCO after the addition of Uzbekistan. China's four goals in leading this organization are: (1) resolving long-standing border issues with Russia and the newly independent Central Asia nations; (2) creating a security mechanism for containing the chaos on the other side of its borders and isolating its own problems in Xinjiang; (3) laying the groundwork for trade with and access to the key economic resources of Central Asia—including the increasingly important prospect of energy resources, and; and (4) establishing itself as a significant player in Central Asian affairs before the United States becomes too entrenched through NATO and Partnership for Peace initiatives and before

the Russians attempted to reassert itself into its “near abroad.” In addition to this last point, the SCO also became a platform from which China could advocate its multilateralist vision of a “new security concept”, in contrast to U.S.-led unilateralist or alliance-based security structures.

Dr. Finkelstein noted China’s reaction to the post-9/11 deployment of U.S. forces to Central Asia and suggested three discernible phases. Beijing first evinced shock and worry over ultimate U.S. intentions in the region and how they would affect immediate and long-term Chinese interests. Phase 2 of the Chinese analysis became apparent within six months after the start of the campaign. At this point, Chinese assessments began to conclude that successful U.S. operations in Central Asia might actually stabilize the region and serve Beijing’s near- and mid-term interests. These interests include (1) destroying radical forces that also threaten China and (2) laying the foundation for regional economic development that will assist China in pursuing future trade policies in Central Asia. Phase 3, currently operative, sees Chinese analysis reverting back to concerns over the long-term intentions of the U.S. in the region. How long will U.S. forces stay? What kind of “footprint” will they have? What type of political influence will Washington try to develop? China, he noted, saw the inception of the war on terrorism as an opportunity to stabilize long-strained security relations with the United States. However, Dr. Finkelstein offered that few Chinese analysts seem to believe that the war on terrorism will by itself provide the glue needed to cement a better strategic relationship with the U.S. given other extant security differences.

Overall, Dr. Finkelstein suggested that Beijing’s long-term objectives in Central Asia remain clear, consistent, and undeterred: ensuring China’s security in the border regions, ensuring no power perceived to be hostile to China dominates the region, and ensuring access to trade and natural resources in the region.

Fiona Hill

Dr. Hill began by noting that China is following through with its intention of developing strong economic ties with Central Asia, especially with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Key projects underway include those to develop road, rail and communication links across Central Asia from the Chinese frontier, with some funding from the Asian Development Bank. China is also investing in energy projects in the Central Asian states and the Caspian Sea region. However, Dr. Hill pointed out, while China and its Central Asian neighbors tend to share interests in stemming cross-border terrorism and separatism, there are nevertheless cross-border tensions over issues like water resources, especially between China, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Persistent drought and misuse have led to major water shortages in the region, she explained, increasing cross border antagonism, and as Afghanistan begins to develop once more, it could also seek to tap into regional water resources, creating even more tension.

On the SCO, Dr. Hill noted that the Russians and Central Asians accept China’s practical interests in the region as legitimate. In addition, the Central Asian states have encouraged the expansion of the SCO, at least in terms of its capabilities. They see it not just as a condominium between Russia and China, but as a means for Russia and China to solve their differences, as well as a way to regulate their own disputes because there are so few forums to mediate regional relations. Although the initial focus was on border disputes between Central Asia and China, the mandate of the SCO has changed to include growing regional cooperation, particularly in the security and economic spheres. Counterterrorism and anti-drug trafficking are major elements of

the new agenda. This has led to the planned anti-terrorism center in Bishkek and the combined military exercises mentioned by Dr. Finkelstein.

Dr. Hill pointed out that the prominence of the SCO diminished somewhat in the aftermath of 9/11, although activity has ratcheted up again since summer 2002. India and Pakistan have expressed interest in joining the group, and some Central Asian states, especially Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, would like to see the SCO become an expanded regional security mechanism. These hopes are aided by the prospect of an increasingly peaceful Afghanistan, the waning threats from the Taliban and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and new, robust ties with the United States.

Dr. Hill calculated that the greatest change in the region, however, has not been in relations between Central Asia and China, or Central Asian states and Russia, but in U.S.-Russia relations. Russia has reemerged in the region, in part because the United States needed its assistance in the campaign in Afghanistan, and because Washington gained a new sense of Russia's potential importance in the region after 9/11, given the evident power vacuum there in the 1990s. The establishment of Russian forces at the Kant airbase in Kyrgyzstan in December 2002 underscores this point. However, although Russia's cooperation with the U.S. may have restored Moscow to a more active role in the region, Dr. Hill did not believe that this has undermined any of China's long-term plans for economic and political penetration in the region, especially when the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan downsizes and Washington's strategic focus shifts to Iraq. Russia and China are clearly both waiting for the time when the United States' presence is diminished.

Dr. Hill concluded by presenting some key regional issues she felt deserve greater attention. First, internal Central Asian markets are still weak. Their reforms have faltered and Russia remains the strongest economic attraction in the region, despite China's growing role. However, Central Asia has developed a comparative advantage by facilitating trade between China and Russia, with Central Asian traders taking consumer goods from China to Russia. China and Russia both have major energy interests in the region and there is an increasing possibility that Kazakhstan may export its gas to China in the future via a Russian pipeline, rather than directly from Kazakhstan to China.

Dr. Hill also catalogued a multitude of regional developmental challenges including public health, drug trafficking, water resource management, energy development, and trade. All these issues should be addressed on a regional basis and will have to include both Russia and China if they are to succeed. This is particularly the case with regard to heroin trafficking from Afghanistan into Europe via Russia, now causing the rapid increase of HIV infection along the drug routes. This is a major security concern for China, as well as for Russia, and will likely be on the agenda for future SCO meetings. Likewise, Afghanistan remains the big question for Central Asia, China and Russia. If stability is not fully restored in Afghanistan, the rest of Central Asia will suffer. Dr. Hill finished by arguing that there are many reasons for cooperation between Russia and China in Central Asia, despite the sense of competition that might rise to the surface.

Richard Hoagland

Mr. Hoagland began his presentation by noting China's geographic interest in Central Asia, which include border demarcation, energy needs, containing separatist and terrorist threats, and creating a balance of power in the region that factors in itself, Russia, Iran, the United States, and other South Asian countries. These interests, though, are fairly nascent compared to Russia's intense and direct interest in the region. While admitting that China has a definite commercial interest and a desire to crack the various protectionist markets in the region, he believed that China would not take the same degree of interest in Central Asia at this juncture as Russia does. Chinese interests also seem to be qualitatively different from Russian interests. For example, the Russians are in the process of establishing the Kant airbase under the rubric of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) rapid reaction force, but no one expects the Chinese to seek any sort of similar military facility in Central Asia.

Mr. Hoagland went on to describe the current state of U.S. diplomacy in the region, stating that the United States has now been active in Central Asia for 12 years, though a more prominent military and security dynamic came to the fore since 9/11. America's new goals are largely focused on a long-term engagement to ensure these countries never become an Afghanistan-like haven for terrorist actors. Washington believes that long-term security requires political and economic reform and a full respect for human rights. And those elements, if genuinely implemented, will lead to a long-term security and stability for the countries of Central Asia and for the region as a whole. According to Mr. Hoagland, the U.S. government understands this is a long-term commitment, but the Russians tell Americans that they are optimists whereas Russians are realists. Moscow argues that rapid reform can lead to the very instability the United States seeks to inoculate through reform in the region. Mr. Hoagland's response has been that Americans are indeed optimists, but are very much aware of the problems and difficulties in the region and are in this for the long haul. In particular, he noted, the United States is keenly aware of how much it still needs to learn about the region, how complex the region really is, and how long it will take to overcome the legacy of the past seventy years and even the last several centuries.

Mr. Hoagland then laid out the numerous factors hindering the stabilization and development of the Central Asia states. First, some leaders have seen the imperative of stability as an opportunity to crack down and resist the American belief that long-term stability comes from open, democratic free market systems. This is still very much a minority view in the region.

The second complex problem is corruption. Corruption at the highest levels, including by members of some leaders' families, results in the zealous protection of ill-gotten assets and avoidance of prosecution at all costs. Mr. Hoagland believes that this is one of the roots of political repression in the region and for the concomitant lack of democratization.

A third problem is election fraud. There has yet to be a fully transparent election in the region that meets international democratic standards. This is easily explained by the above-mentioned problems. Economic nationalism is the fourth complex problem brought up by Mr. Hoagland. These nations have squeezed international investors rather than welcoming them as true partners. Some of these countries indulge their desire to "splash in the shallows of free market economy while clinging to the shore of command and control manipulation."

Fifth is organized crime. This problem is not well understood by the U.S. government, but it is one of the defining factors in the region and can be ignored only at great risk to U.S.

interests. Lastly, Mr. Hoagland explained the problem of inexperienced oppositions. For the most part, opposition politicians in the region have been tightly controlled, often harassed, and too frequently repressed. As a result, the growth of a “loyal opposition”, even as a concept, is severely retarded, leading opposition politicians to issue maximalist demands – all or nothing – which only engenders more distrust, conflict and confrontation.

In listing these problems, Mr. Hoagland acknowledged he may be one-sided and that there had indeed been successes in nearly every one of these countries. He catalogued the problem side of the ledger to illustrate the challenges faced by the United States in the region. In concluding, he argued that neither Russia nor China is willing to work on these problems with America, rendering the achievement of U.S. goals in the region all the more complex.