

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 Two: Counterterrorism, Stability, Internal Security, and China-Central Asia Relations

March 5, 2003

Overview

In our second forum on China's emergence in Central Asia, five speakers examined the issues of counterterrorism, stability, and internal security in China-Central Asia relations. The first two speakers offered keynote remarks. First, drawing from a long and distinguished career as a diplomat in Asia and the Middle East, Ambassador Chas Freeman discussed China's interests in the region and their historical roots. Next, Dmitri Trenin, Director of Carnegie Moscow, went on to highlight the different sources of instability in Central Asia and the effect they are having on China's foreign policy. A panel discussion followed with Graham Fuller, former Vice Chair of the National Intelligence Council, giving a presentation entitled "Islam Across Borders in China and Central Asia." Next, Nancy Lubin, president of JNA Associates, Inc., explored the effect of transnational threats in Central Asia by focusing on the complex issue of drug trafficking in the region. The panel concluded with Thomas Sanderson of CSIS detailing China's response to both domestic and international terrorism.

Chas Freeman

Ambassador Freeman began his statement by reminding the audience that China, particularly Western China, is part of Central Asia, and the anomalous situation was that China *did not* have a role during the long period of Soviet occupation there. He noted that it has been remarkable how China has reconstituted its relationship with an increasingly independent Central Asia in the last twelve years and has developed a successful "cooperative engagement" in the region. China has worked out a series of peaceful resolutions to longstanding disputes, settled border claims, worked out conflicts, and has even created a cooperative security organization and carried out a joint military exercise for the first time.

Ambassador Freeman then recalled how China, like the U.S., paid little attention to the Central Asian states during the early stages of their independence. But in the last several years, China has begun to develop institutions and expertise that focus on Central Asia as an entity separate from Russia. However, the legacy of Russian occupation remains and there is still a great deal of suspicion by the Russian-educated populations about China's true intentions in the region, particularly the fear of large-scale Chinese immigration.

Shortly after Central Asian independence, businesses in China saw great opportunities for investment. Many opened offices, but most closed by 1997 due to bad experiences with the Russian

mafia. Instead of maintaining permanent offices, China now welcomes Central Asian traders as far inland as Chengdu to purchase Chinese goods for distribution through Central Asia.

Before laying out China's specific interests in the region, Ambassador Freeman noted how remarkable it is that Russia actually invited China to help stabilize Central Asia by participating in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. He stated that China's primary interest in Central Asia derives from its overall foreign policy strategy of seeking a peaceful environment. Specifically, China has sought to avoid the emergence of great power rivalry and refrain from being drawn into struggles between the various Central Asian countries as they establish their national identities and power relationships. China has concluded that the greatest danger to Central Asia comes from Central Asians themselves seeking to find outside partners to promote their own interests.

China's second objective is to prevent separatism, particularly those who use terrorism as a *means* to that end. By opposing separatism, the Chinese are actually opposing the use of terrorism to achieve it. U.S. intervention in Afghanistan offered an opportunity, among other things, for the United States and China to turn over a new leaf and pursue a more cooperative relationship. Ambassador Freeman did not believe that China is very concerned about the U.S. presence in Central Asia, both because it has had an immediate, short term stabilizing effect, and because it is likely to be self-limiting. Moreover, the Russians can be counted upon to object long before the Chinese do to an American effort to dig in.

The third Chinese interest highlighted is in the use of Central Asia as a source of energy supply and as a means of transit to markets in Europe and the Middle East. Multiple long-term infrastructure projects, including oil and gas pipelines, roads, and railroads, have been initiated. Interestingly, these long-term projects will not be built unless they are economically viable, because the central government will not subsidize them. Additionally, while shuttle trade between China and Central Asia is developing along mutually beneficial lines, there are tensions on both sides of the border. Many Central Asians feel that China is dumping cheap goods and the Chinese are annoyed with Central Asian smugglers bringing drugs, guns, and even wildlife in and out of China.

In concluding, he surmised that perhaps the best bilateral relationship to emerge has been with Kyrgyzstan. Moves have also been made to put people with a background in China into senior positions in Kazakhstan, although the Kazaks still remain quite suspicious of the Chinese. In Uzbekistan, the relationship has developed largely along security lines. When the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) challenged the Uzbek regime in the Ferghana Valley, the Chinese responded with emergency supplies of ammunition and equipment as well as some training. China's relationship with Turkmenistan appears to be developing well. Sino-Tajik relations are still developing slowly. And finally, China continues to play a more or less positive, peaceful, and constructive role in Afghanistan.

Dmitri Trenin

Dr. Trenin focused on regional instabilities in Central Asia and their effect on China's foreign policy, noting its prominent place on the strategic landscape for many countries. He outlined the different sources of regional instability, focusing first on separatism. The creation of five independent Central Asian states after the collapse of the Soviet Union emboldened many groups in Chinese Central Asia, such as the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. This separatism is a serious problem to China, though it is important not to exaggerate it.

The second source of instability is the rise of fundamentalist Islam, especially when it is linked to separatist activity. The many problems of the Central Asian states have given rise to increased fundamentalism. Central Asia is also vulnerable to cross border influence from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other hotbeds of Islamic militancy. However, Islamic revival is thoroughly normal and essentially healthy if Central Asian nations are to become modern states.

Militancy is the third problem Dr. Trenin pointed out, especially if it merges with separatism and becomes a violent struggle for an Islamic state. The Central Asian variety of terrorist is different from

that of Al Qaeda, though there are some links between these different groups. Moreover, The roots of these problems still remain, even after 9/11.

Imminent leadership change, as many of Central Asia's founding presidents leave their posts (by choice or not), is the fourth source of instability. Also, if Pakistan should succumb to rising internal tensions, the catastrophe will be more than region wide.

The fifth and final source of conflict that Dr. Trenin observed was the potential for interstate conflicts. Despite the lack of armed hostilities, the standoff across the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border sends a chilling signal to others. Ethnic tensions between Uzbekistan and many of its neighbors are serious. Essentially, the problem for China is not being drawn in, but that conflicts between weak states would open the floodgates to the other factors outlined above.

Dr. Trenin used his remaining time to discuss China's policy response to these threats. He first observed that China has, in fact, become a player in a narrowly defined former Soviet Central Asia and is a stabilizing force in the region, something with which the Russian government agrees.

Second China is updating its approach to security. There is a new interest in counterterrorism and multilateral efforts, as well as bilateral military exercises, most recently with Kyrgyzstan. China's third response is looking at borders in a new and cooperative way. This includes all agreements signed in Shanghai, and other Chinese efforts to reassure the Central Asians.

The fourth response is enhancing bilateral contacts with Central Asian countries. Lastly, The Chinese have developed a "co-stewardship" with Russia within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and want the Russians to continue playing a stabilizing regional role at least until China is strong enough to take a higher profile in the region. The Chinese have managed to be respectful to the Russians without being deferential to them.

Dr. Trenin concluded by discussing the limitations and problems for Chinese policy. First is the lingering perception of China as a hegemon-in-waiting. Central Asian elites, particularly Kazakhs, regard their country as being wedged uncomfortably between Russia and China. The second problem concerns the limited resources China can commit to Central Asian development projects and the limited capability of Central Asia to accept new investments. Third, China is doing a great deal to learn about the region, but their access to decision makers is still somewhat modest, especially compared with that of Russia. Lastly, there is the lingering Chinese fear of strategic encirclement by American forces and a view that the American presence in Central Asia is inherently threatening. Dr. Trenin suggested that it would help if the U.S. would be more transparent and reach out to China as a partner in stabilizing Central Asia.

Questions and Answers

In responding to a question about Russia's policy towards the SCO, Dr. Trenin stated that the Russian view of the SCO has changed over the past few years. It began at a time when Russia's relations with the West reached a nadir and was thinking in terms of its multipolarity concept, using the SCO as a counterweight to the U.S. It was not just about Central Asia; it was about larger issues. Russia has narrowed down its focus recently and it sees the SCO as one of the instruments that it could use to help stabilize the region alongside the refurbished Collective Security Treaty and Russia's bilateral relations to various Central Asian countries. Russia believes that China is a stabilizing force.

The second question was about recent problems in Sino-Russian relations and whether China and Russia are equally uncomfortable with the U.S. strategic presence in Asia and if this issue will ultimately bring those two sides back together again with a common cause.

Dr. Trenin agreed with Ambassador Freeman's characterization that the fundamentals of the Sino-Russian relationship are very sound, but added that over the past few years, Russians have become more apprehensive of the growing might of China. In Central Asia, Russia was shocked to see American forces in the former Soviet territory, but immediately, they recognized the resources and benefits the Americans were bringing to the region. The resources that Russia can commit to stabilizing Central Asia militarily are pretty slim, which is one of the reasons why the Russians have welcomed China to Central

Asia. U.S. military forces eliminated the most serious military threat to Russian Security since the collapse of the Soviet Union: the threat from Afghanistan.

In answering a question on what role China plays in managing tensions between Kazakh-Uzbek relations, Dr. Trenin said China insisted on including Uzbekistan in the SCO. The Chinese are not interested in playing on the balance of power between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, rather they would be interested in mitigating tensions there.

Graham Fuller

Mr. Fuller began his panel presentation on “Islam across borders” by noting that Islam is, by definition, both local and transnational in character and remains both a globalizing force and anti-globalization force. It is globalizing in that it has a universal view of religion, and emphasizes strongly the ties among all Muslims across the whole Muslim world. It is “anti-globalization” however, to the extent that it opposes globalization if it refers to a process of Americanization of the world.

Mr. Fuller highlighted some important data points regarding Islam in China and Central Asia, specifically that: Islam has returned to the region after it was suppressed by the communist regimes of China and Russia; political Islam is not a special problem relating to China or Central Asia and is a broad phenomenon that envelops the whole Muslim world in one form or another; when one talks about Muslim politics in this region, it refers to a broad area that is called “Greater Central Asia” that encompasses China’s Xinjiang, former Soviet Central Asia, Kashmir, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and even Turkey, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia in some senses; and it is important to think of political Islam as a vehicle for addressing grievances, not a *source* of action.

Political Islam has also gained great strength around the world through the phenomenon of the crushing of opposition political parties. When all opposition activity is banned, the Islamists benefit because they organize from within mosques and are deeply rooted in the grass roots of the country, more than any other party. Only the active participation of other political movements in opposition will rival the present monopoly of political Islam – today the strongest single force in most of the Muslim world.

Mr. Fuller described that Islam in the Central Asian region fulfills at least three major functions: 1) it is a source of *identity* and *nationalism* that aims at self-determination of Muslim minorities who live under oppressive *non-Muslim* rule; 2) it represents a framework for calls for reform within Muslim states that suffer from bad governance under authoritarian rule; 3) and it also represents a broader pan-Islamist vision in the movements of the violent Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) or the non-violent Hizb ut-Tahrir, both of which aspire to a greater Islamic state across Central Asia.

Mr. Fuller also explained how many progressives who view the anachronistic borders demarcation as damaging to the region’s stability also share the idea of a united Central Asia. However, a few radical forms of Islamism involve violence or terrorism as is observed in Xinjiang (in both religious and secular forms), and in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The Afghan war contributed to many of these problems, though most radical movements emerge from internal problems in the states themselves.

Mr. Fuller concluded by discussing several implications for the United States. First, the issue of independence for Muslims under oppressive non-Muslim rule must be addressed. Confusing the symptom of “terrorism” with the cause will intensify the problem down the road. Second, reform and democratization in the region is an essential component in any battle against radicalism. So far the war against terrorism has exacerbated rather than ameliorated the power of the authoritarian state across Central Asia, and leadership in these states have used the war against terrorism as justification for increased internal repression. In finishing Mr. Fuller stated that Islam is likely to remain on the political scene as long as no alternative political movements exist. It will continue to serve as a source of identity and provide the vocabulary for calls for justice and change.

Nancy Lubin

Dr. Lubin focused her remarks on the issues of narcotics trafficking in this part of the world as a security issue, looking at both the problems on the ground and what the United States is doing in Central Asia to combat them. Her first point was that since September 11, narcotics trafficking has taken center stage and has become an important key to U.S. security interests and its response to terrorism. In that vein, in 2002 alone, the U.S. has allocated close to one hundred million dollars to counter narcotics efforts in Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Caucasus. There have also been significant allocations to cooperative efforts with China, Pakistan and other countries in the region to fight drug trafficking.

Dr. Lubin's second point was that despite this effort, this year has seen some of the highest levels of drug cultivation and trafficking ever in Afghanistan and its neighbors. Much of this is going through Central Asia and the implications of this for the drug trade, terrorism, and even society have been major. The incidents of HIV/AIDS have grown enormously in Central Asia. Estimates now range between about 1,500 to 15,000 reported cases of HIV/AIDS, but it has been growing so rapidly that the UN and others have predicted an AIDS epidemic within the next decade or so in the five Central Asian nations. Some needle exchange and education programs are internationally funded, but more are needed. With greater economic troubles in the region, more and more of the poor, particularly women, have become involved in the drug trade, leading to higher incarceration rates. This has also become an opportunity for local governments to use narcotic trafficking as an excuse to crack down on any political opposition. Certainly there have been a number of incidences of Uzbekistan's government planting drugs on their own political opposition or members of the IMU.

Her third point was that despite some well-founded and very concerted efforts by the U.S. to address the drug trade, it is very hard to determine if the U.S. has inadvertently made some of these problems worse. The U.S., the U.N., and other international actors can boast some high successes. The seizure rates have gone way up, particularly on the Tajik-Afghan border and the U.S. had put a lot of effort into both training and equipping law enforcement. At the same time, though, high seizure may just reflect higher trafficking rates, so that in fact they have been staying at about a ten percent seizure rate across the board. But more importantly, in a region that has some of the most corrupt countries in the world, where law enforcement is easily bought off, there is a great deal of concern that the U.S. is just teaching smugglers to be more effective. Also, there has been increased concern that programs to equip and train government forces are just making them better at suppressing opposition parties.

In her fourth point, Dr. Lubin explained that up until recently, China's drug problem has been very separate from that in Central Asia. Central Asian drugs tend to end up in Russia or Western Europe. Until recently, the main source for drugs in China has been Myanmar. The BBC recently reported, though, about the nervousness within Kyrgyzstan that Chinese Triads might be involved with the trade as well, and that what has been traditionally viewed as two different problems, may now be merging. The Chinese government seems to be concerned with these long standing contacts between Afghanistan and separatist Islamists terrorists, especially if elements in western China are making more contacts and using more of these drugs proceeds to fuel their activities. The potential ties across the borders is starting to take a more prominent place, particularly in the creation of the SCO counterterrorism center in Bishkek, though no real concrete actions have gotten off the ground.

In concluding, Dr. Lubin offered three suggestions on how to redirect and augment anti-drug efforts in Central Asia. First, more effort should be made to coordinate activity between those monitoring drug flows from Central Asia to the west and the flow into China, even if the effort ends up debunking the notion that in fact they are. Second, the China-Central Asia connection should be taken more into account in designing new counterterrorism and drug control programs, especially those addressing societal issues and overall stability in the region. And lastly, these programs and projects need far more accountability, far more oversight, and far more monitoring, both by locals and by international donors and experts. The U.S. and international groups cannot afford to inadvertently be making these problems worse.

Thomas Sanderson

Mr. Sanderson addressed the issue of China's response to domestic and international terrorism. He noted that overall, China's counterterrorism policy is well thought out and well-executed: It allows China to simultaneously address their fears in Xinjiang from two sides, while also improving its standing in Central Asia and its relationship with the US.

Mr. Sanderson first approached the drivers for China's counterterrorism policies in Central Asia. These include maintaining the security of China's Central Asian borders, preventing the rise of hostile powers in Central Asia, and maintaining access to Central Asia's natural resources. China's efforts to establish the SCO, its counterterrorism center in Bishkek, China's joint exercises with the Kyrgyz, and, China's counterterrorism cooperation with the U.S. helps China meet three related and somewhat more specific interests: 1) to cut off support to and increase pressure on suspected separatists in Xinjiang; 2) to engage Central Asian States in efforts to limit the activities and reach of ethno-nationalists and extremists who might support separatists in Xinjiang or whom might otherwise destabilize Central Asia; and 3) to leverage China's pre-911 establishment of the SCO as a means to work more closely with the United States and improve the overall U.S./China relationship and safeguard Chinese influence in the region.

Mr. Sanderson elaborated on these points by stating that the overarching goal of Chinese counterterrorism policy is to isolate any potential separatist movement in Xinjiang and that operations with the U.S. and Central Asia has borne fruit with the naming of ETIM to the State Department's Foreign Terrorist Organization's list and the increase of friendly relations with Central Asian states. Moreover, another goal, but less important than controlling the situation in Xinjiang, is China's interest in strengthening its role in Central Asia at a time when the U.S. has made such unexpected inroads into the region.

Next, Mr. Sanderson addressed the question of what China's counterterrorism policy means for its position in Central Asia. He explained that 9/11 presented both opportunity and obstacle for Chinese interests in Central Asia. Chinese efforts to raise the profile of the SCO were initially set back. China's strong relationship with Pakistan is at risk of being supplanted by the renewed Pakistan-U.S. relationship, as is China's interest in maintaining a Central Asia free of excessive influence by another major power. However, China is burnishing its image as a cooperative player in global security. Chinese counterterrorism efforts provide added weight to the SCO role and, therefore, afford China a better opportunity to represent its interests in the region. China can now better pursue its policies regarding outside influence in Xinjiang by having greater attention paid to border security and the movement of Central Asian extremists.

Mr. Sanderson concluded by establishing many of the issues that affect China's future outlook in Central Asia. He calculated that China's prospects for safeguarding its interests in Central Asia are well served by its current counterterrorism policy. By receiving greater recognition of its problems in Xinjiang and by improving cooperation with Central Asia, China can confront this interest from two sides. Strengthening the SCO and speeding up the Bishkek Counterterrorism Center will be key in this respect. Additionally, the U.S.-China dialogue on terrorism can only improve the larger bilateral relationship. Much remains to be seen, though, including the affect of war in Iraq and potential conflict with the DPRK, the role of Afghan stability and remaining remnants of Al Qaeda and the Taliban play in regional security, and the attention paid to China's treatment of the Uyghur minority.

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