

Book Review Essay

Grounding Central Asian Geopolitics

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Alexander Cooley (2012), *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Power Contest in Central Asia*, New York / Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19981-201-1 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-19981-200-4 (paperback).

Marlène Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse (2013), *Globalizing Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Challenges of Economic Development*, Armonk: M.E. Sharp. ISBN 978-0-76563-504-4 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-76563-505-1 (paperback)

Nick Megoran and Sevara Sharapova (2013), *Central Asia in International Relations: The Legacies of Halford Mackinder*, London: C. Hurst and Co. ISBN 978-0-19932-797-3 (hardcover).

The cover of Alexander Cooley's *Great Games, Local Rules* epitomizes the way that Central Asia has been treated in macro-scale geopolitical writing since 1991 (see Figure 1). With the fall of the Soviet Union, scholars and observers were quick to pinpoint a supposed power "vacuum" in the region. The vacuum metaphor represents less an inert space emptied of powerful actors, but in these authors' imaginary is more accurately understood in terms of the vacuum's sucking process – drawing in powers from all around the world to the center of the Eurasian continent. In the cover art of Cooley's book, we see the symbolic representation of the three powers that have traditionally been assumed to be the three relevant actors in the post-Soviet making of Central Asian geopolitics: the dragon for China, the bear for Russia, and the eagle for the United States. The animals are depicted as solid black outlines, but with sharp lines, and in aggressive positions, surrounding a solid red map of Central Asia (given the frequency with which Central Asia is termed the "heart" of Eurasia – especially by Kazakhstan's longtime president Nursultan Nazarbayevⁱ – one might even say that the map indeed looks a bit like a bloody heart). Combined with a forceful red background, the overall message of this image is certainly not one of cooperation and negotiation, but clearly pits these animals against one another – with the depopulated territory of Central Asia at the center of their struggles.

This image of "Great Power" conflict, I argue, is significant because it belies a particular vision that has long prevailed in mainstream Anglophone writing about Central Asia's geopolitics, but which it is currently in vogue to qualify with a claim that the local *does* matter. To quote Cooley: "the Central Asian states, even the weaker ones, are not passive pawns in the strategic maneuverings of the great powers, but important actors in their own right."ⁱⁱ This is paralleled in Marlène Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse's *Globalizing Central*



Figure 1. The cover of Cooley's book, with the "Chinese" dragon, "Russian" bear, and "American" eagle representing the three "Great Powers" traditionally assumed to be in contest in Central Asian geopolitics.

Asia, where they argue at the outset that: “A realistic interpretation of the interaction between Central Asian countries and external actors is therefore not of a ‘Great Game,’ but rather of many ‘little games’ that are modular, evolving, negotiable, complementary, and not exclusive of one another.”ⁱⁱⁱ This argument – that Central Asia is no simple stomping ground for Great Powers – appears to be the new orthodoxy of many regional studies scholars. But in many respects, these new accounts of Central Asian geopolitics are more of a rearticulation of the same statist geopolitics, but with the now-compulsory disclaimer that “the local matters” – apparently with the goal of preempting critiques that conventional writing of the region’s affairs emasculates and erases the agency of local agents. And yet, the statist lens of classical geopolitics lives on in both of these two books, which I will consider first, before moving on to what I deem to be an alternate approach found in the edited volume by Nick Megoran and Sevara Sharapova.^{iv}

Alexander Cooley is explicit about his agenda in *Great Games, Local Rules* at the outset: “This book examines the dynamics of the interaction between the United States, Russia, and China as they attempted to exert influence in Central Asia from 2001 to 2011. It explores the different strategic interests of the great powers, identifies their tools of influence and assesses their impact on Central Asia’s political institutions and practices.”^v But, he argues, he puts forward three main arguments that depart from the “classical Great Game framework.”^{vi} First, he claims that because the “great powers’” security and strategic agendas have differed, “thereby allowing Washington, Moscow, and Beijing to simultaneously pursue their interests in the region.”^{vii} Here Cooley is interested in countering the zero-sum accounts of great power contest in the region. Second, he goes further to challenge the zero-sum narrative to suggest that the US, Russia, and China have actually “forged tactical partnerships with the other members of the ‘strategic triangle.’”^{viii} Although “their agendas have generated some flash points, tensions, and direct responses,” their “coexistence in the region” has largely been characterized by far less conflict than is usually depicted in the “classical Great Game framework.”^{ix} Cooley’s third overarching argument is, as already mentioned, that the Central Asian states “themselves” are important actors and that an exclusive focus on the great powers “neglects the considerable agency demonstrated by the Central Asian states in dealing with their geopolitical suitors,” and that their governments have “drawn up the ‘local rules’ that guide many of these geopolitical interactions, learning to leverage this interest and even fuel perceptions of regional competition to guard their domestic political power and extract economic benefits.”^x

After these introductory remarks, the second chapter then outlines three such “local rules.” The first, Cooley argues is that “regime survival is state security,” i.e. that all the Central Asian governments “have made regime survival their overwhelming political imperative, formulating domestic and foreign policies in order to maintain power, entrenching one-party patrimonial systems and eliminating threats to their authority.”^{xi} The second rule is that “state resources are used for private gain, especially for the ruling elite,”^{xii} and the third is that “Central Asian elites have perfected the art of serving as intermediaries between their local constituencies and external patrons and suitors,” i.e. talking the talk to get desired financial and political capital from external actors, but strategically funneling this into their own patronage networks so as to shore up their hold on power.^{xiii} The next three chapters are then dedicated to each of Cooley’s three “great powers” – Washington, Moscow, and Beijing. The sixth chapter then considers democratization and human rights issues, and their connection with the anti-terrorism discourse. Chapter 7 considers the case of the “bidding war” for Kyrgyzstan’s Manas air base, while Chapter 8 considers regional corruption, including a short case study of “murky fuel contracts” at Manas.^{xiv} The last chapter before the conclusion, where Cooley tallies the “scorecard,”^{xv} considers the effectiveness of various institutional networks to promote regional cooperation.

Laruelle and Peyrouse’s *Globalizing Central Asia* follows a markedly similar structure, although the texture of their analysis is rather different in that it provides a near-encyclopedic approach to the region’s contemporary political and economic affairs. Despite this seemingly fine-grained analysis, the

text is also remarkably wide-reaching, and is a clear continuation of the two authors' interest in broad, state-scale Central Asian geopolitics.^{xvi} *Globalizing Central Asia* is divided into two parts. The first part is titled, "'Great games' and 'small games': The strategies and outcomes of external actors," and has seven chapters dedicated to the regional involvement of a wide range of "external actors" – Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, Middle Eastern and Gulf countries, South and East Asian countries, and "closer" regional neighbors (e.g. CIS, Caucasus, Afghanistan). The second part, titled "Facing globalization: Strengths and weaknesses of Central Asia's economies," dedicates another seven chapters to various economic sectors in the region: agriculture, hydrocarbons, mineral wealth, electricity, transport, heavy industry, and the services sector. Within each of the chapters, Central Asian states are generally treated together, but the authors are careful to spell out any country-specific differences where relevant for a specific topic.

In both books, the authors' project diverges little from the conventional writing of Central Asian geopolitics, in which "states" (or their capital cities, in the typical think-tank-style metonymic shorthand) are treated as the primary actors of international affairs.^{xvii} So while the "new orthodoxy" of regional geopolitical accounts demands a disclaimer that "the local matters," this is an unfortunately narrow challenge to those accounts. That is, while the authors all see themselves as moving beyond the "great power" egoism of assuming that only those states matter, they overwhelmingly continue the classical geopolitical egoism of assuming that states are more or less coherent entities and "locals," in both cases, are almost exclusively reduced to power-hungry elites in the case countries. For this reason, both books are largely a rearticulation of the same great-power-centric geopolitics, but with the added touch of humility that comes with conceding that the locals have a say too. And yet, once it is recognized as a discursive trope to be repeated before setting out the very same arguments as afore, this concession comes across as equally emasculating and orientaling as those accounts that did not bother with providing such a disclaimer. Why should this be the case? In large part, it is the result of the masculinism of the geopolitical gaze – the floating, all-seeing eye of the geopolitical observer, who is imagined to be a neutral observer, set outside of the realm of politics.^{xviii} The masculinist gaze of the geopolitical commentator is readily apparent in both *Great Games*, *Local Rules* and *Globalizing Central Asia*, in which the authors themselves are completely absent. Instead, their "expertise" is a taken-for-granted fact, which they have cultivated over their lengthy careers as commentators on regional and international affairs. And yet, as is the case with all geopolitical practitioners, they are situated *somewhere*. For their part, Laruelle, Peyrouse, and Cooley all have deep connections in Washington, D.C., and regardless of their own political agendas, this is significant for the way that they write the geopolitics of Central Asia. As we see in the third book considered here, Nick Megoran and Sevara Sharapova's *Central Asia in International Relations*, this writing of global space can be remarkably different from another vantage point.

An alternate approach? Real people doing and saying things

In thinking through the ways in which critical geopolitics might undertake a more geographically responsible geopolitics, Gearóid Ó Tuathail has suggested the need to "ground" geopolitical analysis with regional expertise and fieldwork.^{xix} While the books by Cooley and Laruelle and Peyrouse certainly go a long way toward this end, the state- and elite-centric approach largely leaves *real people* out of the picture. In *Central Asia in International Relations*, Nick Megoran and Sevara Sharapova undertake a much more focused approach to Central Asia's geopolitics by examining the life and legacy of classical geopolitician Halford Mackinder and his work. As the editors note, since 1991, Mackinder's ideas – most notably the "Heartland" thesis – "have experienced a remarkable renaissance in the study of the international politics of Central Asia."^{xx} The book, which is divided in three parts, considers how and why this situation has come to be. Part 1, "Mackinder on/in Central Asia," gives a highly detailed account of Mackinder's life and intellectual development, and especially his relationship with the British imperial

project, with three chapters by Brian Blouet, Gerry Kearns, and Sarah O'Hara and Michael Heffernan. In Part 2, "How Mackinder's Ideas 'Travelled' to the Heartland," three authors consider how specific thinkers have picked up Mackinder's work and "brought it" to Central Asia, ranging from Russian accounts of his work (Milan Hauner), to the cases of Tajikistan (Kirill Nourzhanov) and Uzbekistan (Sevara Sharapova). The last section, Part 3, "Explaining Central Asia Today Using Mackinder," has four chapters that engage Mackinder's work in their case studies: US-Uzbekistan relations (Chris Seiple), regional cooperation and conflict (Alexey Dundich), Kazakhstan's international relations (Gulnara Dadabayeva and Aigul Adibayeva), and lastly a critique of the "fallacy" of Mackinder's heartland thesis, and the repercussions of the myths it has perpetuated in the region (Levent Hekimoglu).

In all these vastly different chapters (some of which are admittedly gratuitous in length), it is abundantly clear *who* is doing and saying *what*. In this respect, the book represents an impressive tome of what Michel Foucault calls the history of "thought" rather than the history of "ideas,"^{xxi} i.e. we see the very agents of change (living in the region and outside of it) actually thinking and effecting regional geopolitics through their seemingly minute decisions. Instead of treating geopolitics as an already-arrived-at "thing," readers are shown how Central Asia has come to be understood as a geopolitical region, and how these imaginaries have shifted over time and among different thinkers from a wide range of political positionalities. The unique benefit of this approach is that neither the "external" nor the "local" actors are obscured by a state-centric lens and, because many of the book's contributors actually live and work in Central Asia, there is no need for the disclaimer that "the local matters." By serving a platform for regional intellectuals to speak for themselves, *Central Asia in International Relations* goes a long way to challenging some of the essentialist divisions between inside and outside that tend to pervade DC-based accounts of the region's geopolitics. To be sure, the reader gets a vastly different set of "facts" from this volume than from *Great Games*, *Local Rules* or *Globalizing Central Asia*, but the overarching question that it raises is, who is "narrating" and who is "performing" Central Asian geopolitics? As Megoran and Sharapova's collection amply demonstrates, these two acts of narration are performance and intimately connected. Accordingly, in the effort to "ground" Central Asian geopolitical accounts, the focus on real people doing and saying things – as simplistic as it sounds – is absolutely imperative. So too must all commentators acknowledge their own role in participating in the construction of Central Asia as a geopolitical space. This need not mean eschewing the role of the "expert," but it does require going beyond the new orthodoxy the "local matters" and giving more sustained attention to the non-state- and elite-based geographies of life in Central Asia.

Endnotes

ⁱ For an analysis of this metaphor, see Koch, Natalie R. 2013. The 'Heart' of Eurasia? Kazakhstan's Centrally Located Capital City. *Central Asian Survey* 32 (2): 134-147.

ⁱⁱ Cooley, Alexander. 2012. *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Power Contest in Central Asia*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 8.

ⁱⁱⁱ Laruelle, Marlène, and Sébastien Peyrouse. 2013. *Globalizing Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Challenges of Economic Development*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, p. 7.

^{iv} Megoran, Nick, and Sevara Sharapova. 2013. *Central Asia in International Relations: The Legacies of Halford Mackinder*. London: C. Hurst and Co.

^v Cooley 2012, p. 5-6.

^{vi} Cooley 2012, p. 6.

^{vii} Cooley 2012, p. 6.

^{viii} Cooley 2012, p. 7.

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- ^{ix} Cooley 2012, p. 7.
- ^x Cooley 2012, p. 9.
- ^{xi} Cooley 2012, p. 21.
- ^{xii} Cooley 2012, p. 25.
- ^{xiii} Cooley 2012, p. 27-28.
- ^{xiv} Cooley 2012, p. 142.
- ^{xv} Cooley 2012, p. 162.
- ^{xvi} See e.g., Laruelle, Marlène. 2010. *China and India in Central Asia: A New "Great Game"?* New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Laruelle, Marlène, and Sébastien Peyrouse. 2011. *Mapping Central Asia: Indian Perceptions and Strategies*. Burlington: Ashgate Pub. Co.; Laruelle, Marlène, and Sébastien Peyrouse. 2012. *The "Chinese Question" in Central Asia: Domestic Order, Social Change and the Chinese Factor*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- ^{xvii} I have already commented upon how Laruelle and Peyrouse's text reproduces the statist conventions of classical geopolitical writing elsewhere; see Koch, Natalie R. Forthcoming. Globalizing Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Challenges of Economic Development. *Central Asian Survey*.
- ^{xviii} Agnew, John. 2003. *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics*. New York: Routledge; Ó Tuathail, Gearóid. 1996. *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Sharp, Joanne P. 2000. Remasculinising Geo-Politics? Comments on Gearóid O'Tuathail's Critical Geopolitics. *Political Geography* 19 (3): 361-364.
- ^{xix} Ó Tuathail, Gearóid. 2010. Localizing Geopolitics: Disaggregating Violence and Return in Conflict Regions. *Political Geography* 29 (5): 256-265; p. 257.
- ^{xx} Megoran and Sharapova 2013, p. 1.
- ^{xxi} Foucault, Michel. 2001. *Fearless Speech*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).