

## Book Discussion

*Marlene Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse The Chinese Question in Central Asia: Domestic Order, Social Change, and the Chinese Factor* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012)

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### Questions and Answers on China's Inside-Out Role in Central Asia Alexander Cooley, Barnard College, Columbia University

*The Chinese Question in Central Asia* is a landmark study and already has established itself as an indispensable guide to China's social, political, and economic relations with the independent Central Asian states. Marlene Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse skillfully weave together their detailed fieldwork observations with an array of data to reveal a dynamic relationship between the Central Asian states and China; one conditioned by the domestic imperatives of both sets of governmental elites, but also increasingly shaped by a host of new social actors ("new mediators"), including entrepreneurs, economic migrants, and students and their growing informal networks.

The book revolves around two related, but equally important, dimensions of Sino-Central Asian relations. The first is the foreign policy and formal relations between China and the Central Asian governments since their independence, including issues related to border management and security cooperation, trade, infrastructure financing and construction, and energy. In Chapter 2, the book also provides a levelheaded and careful analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Beijing's preferred multilateral vehicle for many of these initiatives. With so much hyperbole permeating both Chinese and Western accounts of the SCO, the chapter's sober analysis of the Sino-Russian rivalries and Central Asian pragmatism within the group is an important corrective to the sensationalism that typically informs its coverage. The authors convincingly highlight the tension between the SCO's purported new-style regional dynamism and the actual constraints on problem solving placed on it by its publicly proclaimed noninterference doctrine, noting "the obsession with consensus and maintaining the status quo has in fact hampered the effectiveness of the SCO, and risks delegitimizing it in the future" (p. 42).

Part ii of the book, “From Inside,” discusses the current state of thinking about China and its representations within Central Asian society and is likely to be the book’s enduring contribution. The inside-out approach to the “Chinese question” explodes the unhelpful generalizations that are too often applied to the region, but also casts light on a number of contradictory trends surrounding these new ties. For example, the authors rightly argue that Chinese economic engagement is the main vector through which the Central Asian states have experienced economic globalization, yet many of the same anxieties commonly associated with globalization—displacement of national production, economic uncertainty, requirements for labor flexibility and retraining—are now projected by the Central Asian publics onto the Chinese economic footprint. China is often said to defer to Russian authority for security matters in the region, yet the authors show the active steps Chinese authorities have taken, particularly on the Uyghur issue, to export elements of Beijing’s Xinjiang policy within Central Asia itself, including its economic development strategy and normative framework for combatting the “evil of separatism.”

Most important, we learn from Laruelle and Peyrouse that representations of China in Central Asia have come to serve multiple constituencies and domestic political agendas. In Kazakhstan, for example, fears of China are propagated by “pro-Westerners who criticize China’s influence and on the authorities’ authoritarian orientation; Kazakh nationalist circles, for whom China is a major preoccupation; and associations of the Russian diaspora, who are anxious about the strengthening of ties between Astana and Beijing and raise the specter of Kazakhstan as a future Russian Far East in Chinese hands” (p. 108).

Further, in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan the “China question” has also become the lens through which the media—especially as political space becomes more restricted—and opposition politicians can occasionally criticize foreign policy decisions. Here a more explicit comparison with the backlash against China within African countries might have been warranted; in Africa, two principal vehicles for the backlash have been civil society groups and trade unions, both of which are relatively weak in Central Asia. This also suggests that these diverging trends identified by the authors, of elites praising Chinese official economic partnership while Sinophobia simmers locally, might be sowing the seeds for an even greater resentment against Beijing or Beijing-supporting elites, particularly during a future political transition.

Similarly, Chapter 7, “The New Mediators,” provides a compelling window into the lives and new regional networks created by Chinese economic migrants, including a fascinating discussion of Chinese entrepreneurs and the dynamics of the bazaar trade. Educational exchanges and scholarships offer

opportunities to younger Central Asians, underscoring that engagement with China might well be their best ticket to life in commercial networks and possible upward mobility. Finally, in the superb Chapter 8, “China as an Object of Academic Knowledge,” the book traces the lineage of the relative paucity of knowledge of China in the Central Asian academy back to the organization of the Soviet academy, stressing the limitations and political orientation of Soviet Sinology and its relatively weak presence in today’s Academies of Sciences and universities. Simply put, “the dearth of institutionalized knowledge on China is a major reason for the simultaneous presence of very pragmatic directives and old phobias” (p. 157).

This timely book raises a number of questions and further issues for discussion, four of which I present below:

First, though implied in certain parts of the book, Laruelle and Peyrouse are relatively silent about the comparable evolution of Chinese thinking and official narratives about Central Asia. Is the “Central Asian question” in China subject to similar assumptions and cultural stereotypes as the “Chinese question” in Central Asia? In what areas has Chinese thinking maintained its assumptions about the region and which Chinese policies have evolved or transformed?

Second, the authors are on target when they argue that China has individual strategies and ambitions for each of the Central Asian states, but their nuances might be changing. Kyrgyzstan now appears to be increasingly moving away from China’s orbit, and the re-export trade that once served as an economic engine is likely to be shut down once Bishkek joins the Russian-led Eurasian Union. I would be surprised if Beijing took action against Russia’s new economic pressure on Kyrgyzstan, such as initiating a legal proceeding with the World Trade Organization (WTO), simply because the total economic volumes involved are not worth openly antagonizing Moscow over, regardless of the growing number of Chinese entrepreneurs and economic migrants in the small Central Asian state. By contrast, Turkmenistan seems more exclusively locked into Beijing’s economic orbit, with trade with China constituting 44% of the country’s total in 2013 and few prospects for Ashgabat’s diversification beyond the proposed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline. The growing concern for Beijing has to be Kazakhstan, which, after the Ukraine crisis, appears uneasy with Russia’s new assertiveness and official insinuations about the lack of legitimacy of Astana’s statehood. How would Beijing react to a similar Russian attempt to destabilize the biggest and most critical of the Central Asian states?

Third, will the Central Asian states, in the near future, be able to find significant “globalized” alternatives to economic engagement with China?

As the United States withdraws from Afghanistan and Europe similarly loses interest in Central Asia post-2014, a pressing challenge for the Central Asian states is not that they will stop wanting to pursue multivector foreign policies, but rather that they will be unable to fund credible “third door” alternatives to Russia and China, thereby magnifying the influence of both Beijing and Moscow. Will China effectively crowd out attempts by Asian rivals such as India, South Korea, and Japan to play a greater regional and global role?

Finally, in a constantly changing regional picture, the authors may have actually underestimated China’s emerging regional energy dominance. In 2013 the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) finally secured its coveted stake in the previously Western-dominated Kashagan project. At the same time, ongoing construction on both a spur D of the China-Central Asia pipeline, this time routing through Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and the internal Kazakhstan Bozoy-Shimkent spur are effectively turning CNPC into a regional and local distributor of Central Asian gas, not just an importer to China. How is this heightened energy role, as well as the promised new investment in “New Silk Route Belt” projects announced by President Xi Jinping, likely to affect both Central Asian attitudes toward China’s economic presence as well as China’s future relations with Russia in the region?

With their excellent book, Laruelle and Peyrouse have opened an important dialogue about the “inside-out” presence of China in Central Asia and its likely domestic and regional impact. Their excellent work will frame this important discussion for many years to come.

**Realities and Substance of China in Central Asia: A Model for the  
Study of China in the World  
Robert Sutter, George Washington University**

The rise of China in the twenty-first century has been accompanied by an outpouring of scholarly and specialist publications endeavoring to assess and explain China’s impact globally and in specific regions. While there is considerable debate over Beijing’s current motives and longer-term intentions, and over the implications of China’s rise in specific areas, the broad patterns of Chinese behavior seem clearly presented in the growing literature. What is needed is more precision, based on careful consideration of available evidence about what exactly is taking place politically, economically, and strategically between China and particular world areas, and what are the salient implications of these developments.

Marlene Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse are in an excellent position to apply their vast knowledge and experience with Central Asia to the task of providing an in-depth and comprehensive assessment of Chinese behavior and the implications in this important world area. Their study is well organized, cogently written, and based on the authors' well-grounded judgments after careful review of available scholarship, interview data, and other materials, especially from Central Asian sources. It provides a model for others to follow in deepening our understanding of China's foreign relations in other parts of the world.

This kind of study requires a good knowledge of Chinese policies and practice along with solid assessment of local conditions and dynamics. As China continues to rise in world affairs, the need for such studies will also rise on the part of scholars, specialists, students, and practitioners. We all have to learn how to live with China. Experts like Laruelle and Peyrouse are to be commended for showing the realities that need to be considered in this process.

The book quickly takes the reader beyond the often superficial debates about Central Asia being the focus of some sort of Great Game rivalry involving China, the United States, Russia, and other concerned powers. And it counters the view by some that the region remains something of a backwater in Chinese foreign policy, now that China no longer is concerned with the security threat from the north posed by the Soviet Union and is increasingly focused on international outreach and important issues along its maritime rim. Indeed, the study underlines the priority Beijing gives to foreign relations throughout China's periphery, managing sensitive security and sovereignty issues with direct implications for Chinese domestic stability not evident in other parts of the world.

The Chinese leaders are seen to have been methodical and successful in dealing with the sometimes dramatic changes in Central Asia since the Cold War. China has defined and secured borders, curbed outside support to separatists in Xinjiang province, and developed common ground with regional governments in working against terrorist and criminal elements. It has built access to Central Asian oil and gas supplies and developed strong trade relations. It has fostered a stable and productive environment along this segment of China's periphery while enhancing China's regional and international prominence through effective bilateral and multilateral diplomacy.

Wang Jisi and other Chinese specialists have contrasted the smooth Chinese expansion of relations and influence in Central Asia with various troubles Beijing faces along its eastern and southern rim, ranging from North Korea and Japan to India. For one thing, China's coherent Central Asian policy is not disrupted by external forces that the Chinese government does not control and

that strongly influence Chinese foreign policy in other areas. For example, Taiwan is insignificant in Central Asia. Japan's role in Central Asia also is relatively small. The upswing in US military presence and influence in Central Asia after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States were important changes influencing China's strategic calculus in the region. However, its overall importance has been offset by the fact that the foundation of US power in Central Asia has remained much weaker than in other parts of China's periphery. Meanwhile, Chinese leaders have been successful in keeping Chinese media and other public attention focused away from territorial and nationalistic issues with Central Asian neighbors; and the generally authoritarian Central Asian governments have endeavored to deal constructively and pragmatically with China over territorial and other disputes, a contrast with the nationalistic posturing of some of China's eastern and southern neighbors.

Against that background, Laruelle and Peyrouse show systematically in the first part of the book how China has advanced relations and influence, dealing with border definition and security, multilateral interaction in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and salient economic interchanges including trade, energy, and investments. The second half of the book looks in depth at the implications of China's growing presence and influence in important aspects of Central Asian society, politics, economics, and security. The result is a comprehensive, compelling, and nuanced assessment of the strengths and weaknesses in Chinese interchange and influence.

A reality that adds to the work of those of us laboring in the field of Chinese foreign relations is that change is constantly occurring with China's rise and related developments; Central Asia is no exception. Thus, Laruelle and Peyrouse may need to change their low-keyed treatment of Afghanistan and its impact on China and regional dynamics once US-led NATO forces depart in 2015. Indeed, the authors placed relatively little emphasis on Chinese and regional concerns with the spillover of terrorist and related activism from Afghanistan in the past. New turmoil in Afghanistan is likely after 2014 and will test Chinese and Central Asian abilities to control the spread of violent oppositionists.

Meanwhile, the book's treatment of Russia and its regional impact may also require substantial adjustment, especially if President Vladimir Putin follows gross expansionism in Crimea and Ukraine with similar actions in other parts of the Russian periphery. Also, the book's excellent treatment of the Chinese government's role in gaining access to energy and building infrastructure highlights the absence of systematic exploration of the role the Chinese government plays in promoting Chinese exports of manufactured goods to Central Asia. An impression from the volume is that such trade takes place

through private initiatives, without significant government support. Such a finding is important as it appears to counter still superficial assessments that the Chinese government plays an important role in promoting exports of Chinese manufactures and sustaining positive overall trade balances for China. Finally, while the book is exemplary in using various Central Asian and related sources, more thorough use of Chinese sources would help situate the discussion within the broader parameters of Chinese priorities and concerns in foreign affairs.

### **Sinophobia: A Potential Knot in the Silk Road**

**Raffaello Pantucci, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)**

Sitting in a café in Bishkek recently, a foreign diplomat explained the Chinese problem in Central Asia with a rather simple characterization. The issue, he said, is a “genetic one,” whereby Kyrgyz have an in-built antipathy toward Chinese. While such a simplistic explanation is one that most international relations experts would shy away from, it is one of the clearest issues to leap off the page of Marlene Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse’s excellent *The Chinese Question in Central Asia: Domestic Order, Social Change, and the Chinese Factor*. The biggest factor in favor of the Chinese often seems to be their very overwhelming presence and the potential that their existence just across the Tian Shan mountains poses to the Central Asian states.

On the ground in the markets at Kara Suu, Dordoi, or Berekholka, the Chinese are largely seen in a fairly passive light. Bored and griping as one would expect from workers who are earning a living grafting and selling products to poor populations, the Chinese salesmen and workers largely operate on the fringe of local societies, aware that attracting too much attention can lead to trouble. Chinese energy giants operating in the region tell of training their workers deployed in country to avoid drinking in public and to always have their documents on them, as well as a phone number, in case they get into trouble with local authorities.

And of course, there is trouble. Early 2014 in Bishkek, 16 Chinese workers beat up a policeman after he came across one of them intoxicated at their construction site. This particular attack on a policeman was novel, but clashes between Chinese workers and locals is a fairly regular occurrence in Kyrgyzstan. But what is fascinating, and in many ways a demonstration of issues China faces going out more broadly, sometimes these clashes involve Chinese workers rioting because they have not been paid by their Chinese employer. Either way they look dangerous to locals. For local Kyrgyz who see their markets full

of Chinese goods and a growing presence of Chinese workers on building sites or doing jobs that they feel they could easily do, there is a certain amount of anger and bitterness. This spills fairly easily into resentment that taps into the age-old Sinophobia that Laruelle and Peyrouse attribute to a dearth of Chinese studies in the Soviet era. Where people did study China in Central Asia, it tended to be through the lens of minority populations like the Uyghurs or Dungans—the archetypal Chinese Central Asians.

Into this void fill rumor and conspiracy—concepts endemic to the Russian mindset and consequently ever present in the still predominantly Russian Central Asian region. Stories of a sweeping “yellow peril” fill conversations and discussions. As Laruelle and Peyrouse point out, “Each year the Chinese population increases by more than 15 million people, a number almost equivalent to the total population of Kazakhstan” (p. 183). Or to look at it another way, China will grow by about two Kyrgyzstans plus one Turkmenistan or by two Tajikistans every year.

Of course, these figures and comparisons are completely artificial—a relatively limited amount of this population growth actually takes place in Xinjiang, China’s domestic piece of Central Asia sitting across the border from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. In fact, Xinjiang’s population is proximate to a large Central Asian nation’s: just under 25 million, spread over a geography that accounts for one-sixth of China’s landmass. But bordering the world’s largest manufacturer with a small population that is increasingly becoming dependent on China is a worrying prospect, especially when, as Laruelle and Peyrouse point out, China’s regional efforts have “profoundly changed the economic status quo in the region” (p. 45). All roads in Central Asia no longer lead to Moscow; the newly paved ones go to Urumqi or Kashgar, with new spurs and projects constantly being announced. Be they in infra-structure, like the rail tunnel in Uzbekistan, a new thermal power plant in Dushanbe, or more pipelines to get Turkmen gas back to China, Chinese firms stepping in to fill the void as Rosneft backs out of taking over Bishkek’s Manas airbase, or CNPC receiving a piece of the Kazakh supergiant field Kashagan over an Indian state-owned firm.

But while these are all signs of China’s growth in the region, the reality is that there are a number of games at play here. Since Laruelle and Peyrouse’s book was published, the parameters of a possible strategic outline for China’s push into the region have begun to emerge. Back in September 2013, in the middle of a tour of Central Asia in which he signed almost \$56 billion in contracts, President Xi Jinping gave a speech at Nazarbaev University in which he referred to China seeking to create a “Silk Road Economic Belt” that would connect China to Europe through Central Asia.



To take this speech as a full-on strategy, however, is apparently premature. In discussions in Beijing, Shanghai, and Urumqi (as well as across Central Asia), officials, experts, and others all continue to express a lack of certainty about what exactly this Silk Road Economic Belt means. As one prominent expert recently put it in Shanghai, “Our leadership likes to lay out visions and then leaves it to others to work out the details.” Specifically, Beijing appears to be waiting for the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) to outline the practicalities of the vision, and then all the responsible ministries will be able to implement it. This is meant to happen later this year, and after that—by all accounts—we should start to have a clearer sense of what China’s vision for Central Asia looks like.

But as with all geopolitical puzzles, this is a fluid one, and while China seems to be clarifying its intent regarding Central Asia, Russia has upended the chess-board with its action in Ukraine, causing concern across Central Asia. The push toward a Customs Union and Eurasian Economic Union stretching across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and eventually Tajikistan, as well as the Western sanctions are all having a knock-on effect in Central Asia. In Kazakhstan they are causing concern at an official level as they worry about the impact on their own relations with the West and the fact that through the Customs Union they are tied more closely to Russia’s economy. Talk to traders in Kyrgyzstan’s Dordoi or Kara Suu and they have been feeling this impact for some time; since the Customs Union came into play between Kazakhstan and Russia, re-exporting their goods across Kazakh borders is more challenging. They worry that once their country joins, the cheap Chinese products will have little reason to be re-exported through Kyrgyzstan and it will make more sense to simply go in through Kazakhstan.

And yet, in the face of this, Russia remains the clear primary partner of choice for Kyrgyzstan. Customs Union membership is on track for 2015, and the Kyrgyz still see Russia as an important partner, their primary security guarantor, and employer to the thousands of Kyrgyz who work in Moscow and elsewhere send precious remittances to support family members who stay behind. The first port of call for Kyrgyz politicians remains Moscow, rather than Beijing. Out of choice or fear, they look to Russia as a geopolitical parent even though their long-term economic future lies to the south with China, India, and the other rising powers.

Kazakhstan faces a different issue. Already caught in Russia’s embrace, they are more desperate to make their much-vaunted multivector strategy a reality. China is but one partner in this picture, and Kazakh officials and businessmen will highlight their nation’s growing links to Iran, pending WTO membership, and the fact that they are renewing their partnership agreement with the

European Union as evidence that it is alive and well. Russia is an important partner for them, but not the only one.

The key question here is what this means for the logic of China being the increasingly consequential partner for Central Asia. Is it possible that China's influence in the region is one that is more fragile than it seems and that the underlying Sinophobia is a problem that can be stoked at will to blunt China's push? The raw economic force behind Chinese investment would seem to belie this, especially as Russia has little chance to properly counter this strength, given a faltering economy that is already facing new burdens in Crimea and over Ukraine.

But it does raise questions about China in Central Asia. And it does cast an ever-larger light on what the meat of China's proposed Silk Road Economic Belt will be and how they will try to counter these regional forces and the Sinophobia under it.

For the time being, three aspects would benefit from getting greater coverage:

First, what are Chinese views regarding the long-term goal? Both Laruelle and Peyrouse have long experience in China, but the text does not always address the fundamental question of what the long-term Chinese goal is. On the one hand, this is partially because a clear enunciation of it is something that we are only now starting to see with Xi Jinping's announcement of the Silk Road Economic Belt, but it is something that Chinese strategists have been edging toward for some time.

Second is the reality of the much-vaunted "multivector" foreign policy that Central Asians so often talk about as their strategy. Talk to officials in any country and they will deny Chinese (or any other) dominance, declaring that it is something that they are ably playing one power off the other. The reality of this is often questionable, especially when one considers the irresistible economic force of China compared to all others, making one wonder to what degree the Central Asians actually are able to manipulate and control their destiny.

And finally, there is the dilemma of absorption. How much does China want responsibility or can the Central Asians avoid finding themselves increasingly looking to China to help resolve issues? Is China becoming the regional hegemon by default, with no-one having really thought through the consequences or what it means for regional stability (or who the principal provider of regional security is) in a situation where Beijing is increasingly the most consequential player on the ground that assiduously avoids conflict or becoming embroiled in resolving it? Central Asian tensions and problems will not fade as China rises, and what this means for China is an as-of-yet unanswered question.

**Looking at Central Asia's Geopolitical Puzzles from a Local Perspective  
Response by Marlene Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse, George  
Washington University**

The idea to write this book came from the long, regular trips to Central Asia that we have taken since the late 1990s. When we began writing it in 2007, the domestic landscape, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, had been completely transformed by the arrival of Chinese products in the bazaars and by China as a topic of conversation among our friends and colleagues. However, most available works analyzing China's growing role were limited in their focus to the superficial lens of geopolitical competition with Russia and the United States.

The primary objective of this project was to reconcile the Central Asian narrative on changes to their everyday lives with geopolitical "meta-evolutions" such as China's rise to power in the region. Consequently, we made a fundamental effort to give a voice to Central Asians and to explore these evolutions with grassroots-level narratives, rather than Western-centered and Western-produced expertise. From this also came the idea of a profound interaction between domestic policies and the international arena, and of grassroots-level evolutions proceeding in line with globalized trends. Because when Central Asians say that they worry about the rise of "Chinatowns" in their cities, they reveal a widespread feeling of being a part of a larger trend that is affecting the rest of the world, including the West, which they are then projecting onto their own experiences.

The second part of the book is based on several months of fieldwork and comprises the core of the work, as several reviewers have noted. Exploring China as an object of Central Asia's domestic political agendas and investigating Uyghur and Dungan entrepreneurs, economic migrants, and Central Asian students in China as "new mediators" between the two worlds were our main focus. Our hope was that other researchers studying other external actors in the region could replicate the frameworks for other possible interpretations. Russia, of course, as well as Japan, South Korea, Turkey, Iran, India, and possibly the Gulf States would be the main candidates for this "inside-out" dialogue, to borrow the phrasing of Alexander Cooley. We deliberately left aside analyses of perceptions from the Chinese side. We did not want to end up with two analyses of incomparable discourses, as we were unable to offer the same degree of analysis for China as we can for Central Asian sources and other experts have been working on this issue since then. However, a collective work integrating the way China has been able to act pragmatically in Central Asia in comparison with its more difficult situation in Southeast Asia has yet to be written.

The first part of the book will be quickly overtaken by events, and it provides no more than a snapshot in time. However, we wanted to include a sober and restrained analysis of the region's "geopolitics." Thus we deliberately avoided a trilateral analysis of Russia, China, and the United States. It would have been superficial, as it was not meant to be the focus of the research, and would not have been able to go further than Cooley's great *Great Games, Local Rules* did in analyzing how local governments primarily shape the rules of the "Great Game."

Although four years have passed since we completed the manuscript, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has not significantly changed. The 2014 announcement of its enlargement to include India and Pakistan as members, Afghanistan as an observer, and Turkey as a partner confirms the success of the SCO as a regional platform for dialogue without Western members. But it will dilute even more the possibility for the organization to deal with concrete, grassroots issues in Central Asia, whether water or migration. Calls for regional security cooperation mechanisms will remain at the diplomatic level only, given the many contradictions among member states. While in the early 2000s, the SCO was considered a direct competitor to Russia's regional institutions, the Collective Security Treaty Organization and, at the time, the Eurasian Economic Community, today the competition has vanished. The SCO went further "south" than post-Soviet Central Asia, taking a continental view, encompassing the main Asian powers, and seems to focus on Afghanistan's neighborhood. Meanwhile, Russia has been able to build regional tools that are limited to some Central Asian countries but that are more efficient and able to tackle Central Asia's economic and military realities (withholding judgment on Moscow's goals).

China has reinforced its determinate role in shaping Central Asian economies with the new Silk Road Economic Belt initiative, and indeed the picture of China's dominance over Central Asian energy has evolved since the book was written. Although Beijing's quasi-hegemony over Turkmen gas was visible, its newly acquired stakes in Kazakhstan at Kashagan, although small, have changed the overall picture. The fluidity of trade partnerships, as Cooley mentioned, was already perceptible with the growing competition between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, for control over the primary wholesale markets. Since the book was completed, the role of Uzbekistan has increased drastically with the railway project linking Xinjiang to the Fergana Valley, which seems logical given the country's economic potential and demographics. China's involvement in Afghanistan also became more critical; however, it has been subject to overpromotion that the book tries consciously to avoid. Some of China's main economic projects, such

as the Aynak copper mine, have stalled since then, and China's royalties to the Afghan state budget will not be as high as many Western experts predicted.

Once again, a more sober analysis, far from the short-term hype of media and think-tank communities, helps to better put in context the push-in and push-out of China's involvement in the broader region.

In the conclusion of our analysis, we come back to the widespread feeling in Central Asia that China belongs to another "civilization"; the same applies to India, as we discussed in another book, *Mapping Central Asia: Indian Perceptions and Strategies*. This leaves Central Asians with only Russia and potentially the West and the Islamic world with which to share similar "civilizational" patterns. Hence the difficulty Central Asian regimes and societies have had in responding to changes in perception linked to the 2014 crisis in Ukraine. Although all Central Asian elites agree—discreetly—that Moscow's evolutions are worrisome, the possibilities for exit are limited and the celebrated multivectoralism of their foreign policies seems to be running out of steam. For the Central Asian regimes, more Western involvement in the region is not attractive for several reasons, mostly linked to regime stability and its legitimacy mechanisms, but also because both the United States and European countries are seen as unreliable partners. But more Chinese involvement, which is happening in the economic realm, continues to raise concerns. Sinophobia is growing among Central Asian populations, as seen clearly in Tajikistan since the book was completed, and the hypothesis of a political price to pay in the near-, medium-, or long-term future is of concern for elites. This all underscores the importance of an analysis that intertwines the domestic and international. Our main hypothesis—that representations of China serve many domestic political agendas—will probably become ever more visible with future political transitions in the region and with Russia's renewed engagement in supporting some local constituencies and elites. Although Kazakhstan tries to avoid the dilemma of more Russia versus more China versus more West by investing new, pan-Asian narratives and institutions, China and Russia remain the only metric against which to evaluate other external actors in Central Asia, with no one able to compete at the same holistic level of engagement. China seems therefore to have become the regional hegemon by default, with Russian elites looking at Central Asia more as a burden than as a blessing.