Book Discussion


Questions and Answers on China's Inside-Out Role in Central Asia
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*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 non-interference 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