

China, Central Asia, and the Middle East

- Panel:** Session 2 (Lilac & Tulip Room)
Date/Time: Tuesday, December 11, 2012 / 14:15-15:30
Speakers: Jang Ji-Hyang, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies (Moderator)
Svetlana Kozhirova, L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University
Guner Ozkan, USAK Center for Eurasian Studies
Mirzokhid Rakhimov, Institute of History AS Uzbekistan
Dirk Vandewalle, Dartmouth College
Rapporteur: Rachel Esplin Odell, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Panel Short Summary

As Central Asia and the Middle East are engaged in a period of change and uncertainty, China's policy toward these regions faces a range of opportunities and challenges. In order to frame the discussion of these complex developments, Jang Ji-Hyang posed two central questions to the panelists: First, what are the most important priorities for Chinese foreign policy toward Central Asia and the Middle East? And second, what will be China's greatest challenges as it seeks to pursue those policy priorities?

The panelists responded by identifying China's key interests in Central Asia and the Middle East as energy security and political stability. Speaking of the former, Guner Ozkan pointed to the way that China has sought to secure a diverse array of energy transportation routes as its dependence on foreign oil has increased. This has heightened the importance of Central Asia in Chinese foreign policy as Beijing has sought direct energy routes that are not controlled by the United States. Likewise, Svetlana Kozhirova described the mutually advantageous relationship that has developed between Kazakhstan and China as the latter has increased oil imports from Almaty and the former has utilized western China as an important export route for transporting its oil to the broader Asia-Pacific.

On the subject of political stability, Mirzokhid Rakhimov identified this concern as a principal motivation for Beijing's economic and diplomatic policies toward Central Asia. He described those policies as being characterized by three principal features: increased

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investment and trade in Central Asian countries, non-interference in the internal affairs of those states, and multilateral and bilateral cooperation initiatives. Rakhimov noted that Uzbekistan also prioritizes stability in China, citing an Uzbek phrase, “Your neighbor is stable; you are stable.”

Ozkanre joined that China’s stated preference for non-interference should not be construed to be a neutral position. Rather, in supporting the status quo, China indicates its implicit support for the current regimes. He pointed to Chinese positions on the Syria conflict in the UN Security Council and its engagement in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as evidence of China’s bias toward current authoritarian leaderships.

In addressing the greatest challenges Chinese policy will face moving forward, panelists highlighted changing dynamics in world oil markets and in domestic political regimes in Central Asia and the Middle East. Dirk Vandewalle explained that China has attempted to bifurcate its economic interests in the Middle East from its political approach to the region; however, such an approach is likely to prove unsustainable in the future. He attributed this trend both to China’s growing interests in the region, as well as the United States’ growing energy independence. In the past, Beijing has relied upon the US military presence in the region to help secure oil transit lanes, but in the future, China may increasingly find itself needing to intervene to protect its access to energy in the region.

On a related note, Ozkan argued that domestic political changes in the Middle East and Central Asia could result in major disruptions to China’s economic and political interests in those regions. If democracy were to spread further, China’s support for past authoritarian regimes could damage its relationships with new democratic administrations. Conversely, if radical elements come to power, the new governments could take a more confrontational attitude toward China, particularly regarding its treatment of Muslims in Western China. These volatile dynamics suggest that China’s future policy priorities and approaches will likely encounter increasingly complex dilemmas that will require repeated recalibration.

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