

***Looking West: China and Central Asia, US-China Economic and Security Review Commission (Washington: United States-China Economic and Security Commission, 2015), 173.***

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*Looking West: China and Central Asia* is a US Congressional hearing done in March 2015. Experts on Central Asia were invited to solicit their opinion on the subject. They included: Dr Marlene Laruelle, Eliot School of International Affairs, Dr S. Frederick Starr, Chairman Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Programmeme Johns Hopkins University Johns Hopkins University, Raffaello Pantucci, Director Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, Dr Alexander Cooley, Professor Political Science, Columbia University, Dr Sebastien Peyrouse, Research Professor of International Affairs George Washington University, Dr Erica Downs, Senior Analyst Eurasia Group, Dr Michael Clarke, Senior Research Fellow Griffith University, Dr Niklas Swanstrom, Director Institute of Security and Development Policy, Stockholm, Sweden and Andrew Small, Transatlantic Fellow German Marshall Fund of the United States. Dennis C. Shea and Katherine C. Tobin acted as chair and co-chair of the hearing commission respectively.

The purpose of this report was to examine China's engagement in Central Asia and its implications for US policy in the region. The report is divided into three parts. The part one looks into China's Silk Road policy. The part two highlights trade, infrastructure, and natural resources in China's Central Asian engagement, and the third deals with China's security engagement in the region.

It was pointed out to the Commission that China has been pursuing its interests in Central Asia for three reasons: (a) to promote the security and development of its restive Xinjiang Autonomous Region; (b) to gain access to Central Asian natural resources; and (c) to develop new market for exports.

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Dr Laruelle is of the opinion that each Central Asian State has different views about the fast-growing Chinese influence in the region but all of them want development, at the same time, they are conscious of the Chinese role. He says that Central Asian experts hold pessimistic views about China. They have “Sinophobia” and “Sinophilia” at the same time. They are scared of political instability in Xinjiang. The countries that share border with China such as Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan are more upset of Chinese instability. Sometime they have riots against Chinese traders but they view China as a “lesser evil.”

Starr talks about the motives behind China’s New Silk Road, implications for Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Caucasus, and the United States’ response to the Silk Road project. To him, China’s New Silk Road is an economic and security programme to open a land route between China and Europe and to adopt measures if threatened. He says that Chinese concerns are motivated by Uyghur issue of Uyghur community in Xinjiang, utility of land routes in case of maritime fears, and to advance its strategic interests against any vulnerability staged either by the United States or Russia in the Caucasian region.

Pantucci keeps his testimony to broad geo-strategic implications. He says that China’s influence in Central Asia is an ascending story. China wants to utilize the natural resources of Central Asia and for that matter it wants to lay down the infrastructure to minimize the tussling of Uyghurs, which started with the establishment of China in 1949. He says China is implying heavy security approach for development to set aside separatism. The expert explains all this narrative in much greater detail. The volume also presents a useful panel discussion on these aspects, which is fruitful for US Congress approach and response toward Chinese policy in Central Asia.

Cooley suggests that American policy-makers should devise a long-term engagement through their planning with Central Asia and Eurasia and develop more competitive views toward China and relate the rebalance approach of East Asia with Central Asia.

Peyrouse reviews Chinese investments in Central Asia and holds the view that these investments raise certain concerns as Chinese direct their investment in the heavy and infrastructural sectors. the Central Asians

have already suffered from Soviet infrastructural investments. Chinese have replaced the Soviets and created fears for Central Asians. They prefer manufacturing and consumer-oriented investments, which Chinese are not offering to them. The influx of Chinese products retains the same characteristic of the Soviet-dominated trade in the past. For Central Asians, there is no opportunity in the new Chinese economic drive in the region. Peyrouse explains the disadvantages of the New Silk Road for the Central Asians. Others may differ but it is a good critique to read.

Erica gave a detailed testimony on China's current energy activities in Central Asia. She elaborates Central Asia's large source of overseas production for China's national oil and multinational companies. Over the past two decades, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has established itself as a major foreign producer in Kazakhstan and dominant foreign company in Turkmenistan, controlling one-quarter of Kazak oil. The CNPC holds special privileges of off-shore drillings in Turkmenistan. For Central Asian governments, these are largest investments. AIIB and the Silk Road Funds have been generating new opportunities in the region to boost Central Asian economies. China is also diversifying its energy imports from Central Asia. China considers land-borne trade safer than the sea-borne trade. Countries like Russia and Kazakhstan are unlikely to yield to American pressure on energy-trade with China. The expert says that President Xi Jinping's anti-craft campaign has hard hit on the Chinese oil companies and America should look into these opportunities.

Clarke confines his comments to China's Uyghur factor to see how it drives China's interests in Central Asia. He labelled Xinjiang as a "terrain of hazards" as China rises to a great power status. He says Xinxiang poses the greatest threat to China integrity besides other three threats namely; threats from its 14 immediate neighbours, threats from five distinct geopolitical regions, and threats from beyond China's immediate neighbours. The multi-ethnic Xinjiang is a "Eurasian crossroads". China embarrasses to tightly control Xinjiang to new China policy. Clarke analyses Uyghur reviews on the policy of Chinese governments, since the 1980s, to integrate Xinjiang. President Jian Zemin came up with the Great Western Development Programme. Most lately, China has been trying to regionally integrate Xinjiang with

Central Asia to overcome its unrest. The “Silk Roadism” is the new addition, Clarke thinks.

Swanstrom throws light on the regional context of Uyghur’s threat to China. He says that links between Xinjiang and Central Asia are important to understand. He says that over 80 per cent of Xinxiang’s trade goes to Central Asia and says that this is the only region where China could break out of its perceived encirclement or containment of the United States. This region is also a good opportunity for cooperation between China and the United States, Swanstrom suggests. He says that both Chinese and Russians feel that problems in Central Asian region are the result of external factors. He is also of the view that China is rather weak in Central Asia in terms of its security relations and it prefers a multilateral cooperation in the form of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Small discusses China’s shift in its Afghan policy. Afghanistan was regarded as a peripheral country in China’s policy and it always resisted opening border with Afghanistan but the country became one of the main suppliers of weapons to *Mujahideen* in the 1980s that also aggravated militancy in Xinjiang. Following US drawdown in Afghanistan, Chinese became conscious of the security situation to handle it in the aftermath. Beijing has been facing a law and order situation emanating from militants since 2008. According to Small, main threats to the One Belt One Road (OBOR) and China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are militancy and Indo-Pak proxy war in Afghanistan. China stepped up with aid. It is trying to play a security role in cooperation with Pakistan and the United States.

In a nutshell, the publication gives strong recommendations to the US policy-makers as how to react to Chinese approach toward Central Asia and how to evolve a pragmatic policy. For general readers, the report gives a useful insight on the subject.