

Security Situation in China's Peripheral Regions

How to Look at the U.S. Factor in China's Peripheral Security

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Since the Obama Administration implements the Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy, China's security situation in the peripheral areas shows a downward trend, the specific demonstration of which is the complex factors in political relations between China and many neighbors increase, especially the frictions with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, Burma and other countries crop up from time to time; the marginal effects of "promoting political relations with economic relations" strategy applied to neighboring countries by China have decreased, and to achieve substantial breakthrough of interoperability and interconnection as well as capacity cooperation become more difficult between China and neighbors. Meanwhile, China's territorial waters disputes and fishing disputes with neighboring countries increase and intensity spirals, especially the DPRK Nuclear issue and the South China Sea disputes have become international hot spots. So, what role does the United States play in China's surrounding security pattern? And what should be responses?

China's overall security situation downward trend is related to the U.S. factor

In recent years, the game between China and the United States in China's peripheral regions is becoming fierce, and the reasons are multiple. The different ideology and political system are a very important factor, besides, China's growing strength poses certain challenges to the U.S. hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region. Historically, there is no

defending-major country who is most willing to give up its power. Therefore, we can't simply deny or neglect U.S. China's containment behavior because there is no written document for the American performance, just like some countries, especially the U.S. officials and scholars do.

In fact since 2009, the United States has not only taken actions to systematically curb China, but its deeds and actions are not all "transparent". The United States in China's surrounding areas covertly plans a number of events, for example, some exclusive evidence shows that some American NGOs and think-tank scholars participate in the early planning of the protest against the Myitsone hydropower station in Burma.

Further review of the history, as soon as new China is founded, the United States encircled China, even in the 1970s after relaxation of the Sino-U.S. relations, the United States does not give up the use of Taiwan and other issues to contain China. It is only because the "Taiwan independent" force in recent years has gone too far on the road to secession and the implementation of China's Anti- Secession Law that the Obama Administration has to change its ways and means in order to avoid direct confrontation with China on the Taiwan issue.

From the perspective of China's internal affairs, the Obama Administration uses human rights as a pretext to support the "Xinjiang independent" and "Tibetan independent" force to create disturbances. In surrounding regions of China, Obama Administration supports or incites the Philippines, Vietnam, etc. to engage

in provocation with China, but it does not show up and tries to delay the rise of China at a smaller price. In Korea Peninsula, DPR Korea repeatedly conducts nuclear tests and launches missiles, South Korea agrees to deploy the U.S. THAAD system, so the Northeast Asian situation seems possible to get out of control.

And the military actions taken by United States in the East China Sea, the South China Sea and the policy toward the DPRK nuclear issue, to a large extent, release the wrong signals to Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore and other countries; the United States will defend the alliance system even at a war with China resulting in pressing on every stage step by step by the Philippines and other countries since 2010 in the South China Sea disputes, and becoming insatiable.

However, to establish a new-type major countries relations between China and the United States proposed by President Xi Jinping, to a certain degree, has been echoed by the United States, neither breaking the relations status quo nor engaging in confrontation has become a consensus between China and the United States. The two countries will not launch major strike against each other for the interests of other countries, so since this year, Vietnam has relaxed its tough stance on the South China Sea disputes, and the Philippines's new President Duterte is also seeking improvement of relations with China after taking office, watering down the South China Sea arbitration case.

Can't attribute all the problems to the U.S. opposition

Although changes in China's surrounding security environment in recent years is not unrelated to the United States, yet the United States is not the variable alone, the adjustments of foreign and security policies by the surrounding countries are important factors that can not be ignored. China is surrounded by mostly small and medium-sized countries, which both intend to take ride on the Chinese economic development, but also worry about the over-big China's influence, take suspicion and alert attitude toward rising China, thus

increasing enforcement of the "major country balance" foreign policy, generally welcome the U.S. military forces in the region (country) to continue the presence. From the perspective of their national interests, some neighboring countries hate to see neither the Chinese influence nor the U.S. influence grow unlimitedly, hate to see the Sino-U.S. joint dominance in this region too, and even hate more to choose side between China and the United States and become victims of the Sino-U.S. confrontation.

Although China's comprehensive national strength in recent years grows faster, yet there is a big gap with that of the United States, and greater gap between the two military forces, which particularly makes the balance of neighboring countries not too tilted to China. Not only that, some countries and the United States are allies, which makes them difficult to regard China as the first choice between the United States and China. Therefore, China should better co-ordinate the economic, military, social and cultural forces to carry out peripheral diplomatic work, so that neighboring countries can have more trust in it and give it more support on major issues. Neighboring countries, when deciding whether to cooperate with China and how to cooperate, will surely take into account the U.S. attitude, but the main determinants are domestic interests.

We should also take notice of such problems that we have failed in some matters with the surrounding countries, and some investment projects are blocked, whose obstacles are not all created by the United States, some given competent authorities and companies should not exaggerate the U.S. impact, and take advantage of the U.S. factor to cover up the problems and errors in their own work.

In addition, do not demonize the threat of the United States. Currently, some Chinese public opinions overestimate the U.S.'s threat to China and render radical anti-American sentiment. The authors argue that this mentality and practice are not conducive to maintenance of peripheral security of the country. In fact, the Obama Administration, while curbing China's rise, also adjusts its mentality to China, to a

certain extent, understands and accepts China's new-type major countries relations concept. In terms of peripheral security of China's current and future period, non-confrontational and non-broken relationship between China and the United States are the most important assurance. China cannot adopt the diplomatic policy to ally with other countries against the United States, not only because China is unable to undertake the alliance economic and military costs, but once China adopts the alliance policy, the confrontation between China and the United States will escalate spirally, and even result in bilateral relations broken.

Maintaining peripheral security needs to grasp the balance of the two dimensions

How to deal with the U.S. factor in the peripheral security, there are two extreme views. One believes that since the security challenges in China's surrounding regions almost all are related to the United States, then so long as China keeps good relations with the United States, and China's surrounding security will be guaranteed. The other is that if China attains a real rise, it must be more independent to carry out peripheral diplomacy, and squeeze the United States out of China surrounding regions as soon as possible. The authors believe that although these two views have merits, yet too absolute and extreme as well.

The fundamental differences between China and the United States in ideology, political system and development model will remain for a long time to come, and China will be a rising country most likely to challenge the U.S. global hegemony in the coming period. In other words, the structural contradiction between China and the United States

determines that the United States will not whole-heartedly work for China's peripheral security, although the United States will not take excessive actions against China in a short term because of its disputes in the East China Sea and the South China Sea with the Philippines, South Korea, Japan and others. However, if we pin the hope on the United States of maintaining security in the surrounding areas we go a wrong way.

But meanwhile, we must see that the traditional influence of the United States in China's peripheral regions is deep-rooted, plus a number of allies. Trying to squeeze the United States out of the surrounding areas is very unrealistic, neither the United States will be reconciled, nor the neighboring countries will agree, which need to balance China's influence with the United States.

Therefore, the authors believe that China, as a rising major country, needs not only continuously improve the economic and military strength, but also show the capacity and confidence of a major country, does not overreact to neighboring countries criticism and even a local friction, neither speaks out with a hard tone once a friction emerges, and pays too much lip service with neighboring countries, which will make neighboring countries get closer to the United States. In fact, after the cold war, the international criticism of the United States is the most notable, but the U.S. academic circles, think tanks and the media do not debate with these critiques, which is the performance of strength and self-confidence. While calmly dealing with the U.S. security challenges to the surrounding areas, we should also gradually accumulate experiences to work with neighboring countries and major countries beyond the region.

Observation and Thinking on the Security Situation in Central Asia

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Central Asia is one of the regions with weak security in the Eurasian continents, its seemingly calm appearance contains a variety of risks and crises, so it is rather difficult to predict when and how these risks and crises will erupt. Since the collapse of the former Soviet Union, a series of major malignant security incidents occurred in Central Asia, such as civil war, illegal armed invasion, political riots, ethnic conflicts, terrorist attacks, border conflicts and so on. Currently, the Central Asian region extremist forces and terrorist forces become active again, violent and terrorist incidents show a new round of high incidence.

Vulnerability, comprehensiveness and complexity of Central Asian regional security

Central Asia recently has witnessed some new situations: (1) On August 30, the Chinese Embassy in Kyrgyzstan was met with terrorist attacks. (2) From June to July, Kazakhstan suffered a series of terrorist attacks, and Almaty and Aktope were on red alert against terrorism, and Kazakhstan was on national yellow alert to counter terrorism. (3) After deputy Defense Minister of Tajikistan launched the terrorist attack in 2015, the powerful departments of Tajikistan in May 2016 foiled the terrorist attack plan by members of the Islamic State in the capital Dushanbe. (4) Following the border conflict between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan in 2015, Turkmenistan in 2016 strengthens border defense control, the national military declares in the state of war, and readiness to accept raids

tests. (5) Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan border sees tension on several occasions. (6) Kazakhstan reshuffles the government, changing prime minister, deputy prime minister, chairman of the National Security Committee and other important positions.

These new situations are mainly related to violent terrorist attacks, border conflicts and political changes, reflecting the vulnerability, comprehensiveness and complexity of Central Asia security. Both the traditional security threats and non-traditional security threats exist in Central Asia, among which the religious extremism, terrorism and drug smuggling in non-traditional security areas are particularly prominent. Security issues are closely connected with political, religious, economic, territorial sovereignty, border, water resources, ethnic relations, inter-state relations and other issues. In fact, no central Asian country can be spared in terms of security, security threats in any country can very easily spill over to the neighboring countries and a threat outside of Central Asia is also very easy to penetrate into the region.

Many security incidents have occurred in Central Asia, among which the violent terrorism is undoubtedly the most attractive. In recent years, violent terrorist activities in Central Asia show some new features. (1) The violent terrorist incidents are of small scale, but the frequency is high. The situation has been changing in the past few years, now several occurrences a year but in the past once every several years. (2) The violent terrorist activities spread from an individual country to all countries in Central Asia, terrorism and

extremism have become a regional public peril. (3) The root causes for violent terrorist incidents become complex, such as establishing a "Khalifa state", originating from political struggles, targeting the authorities, aiming at some foreign embassies, resulting from the ethnic conflicts and social contradictions, contending for economic benefits, or the mixture of a variety of factors. (4) The violent terrorist activities are disgusting in nature with serious consequences. In the past the violent terrorists often chose the remote areas under weak control and targeted average citizens and policemen, but now they often choose areas under strong control and target the crowded capital and other major cities, and also government, Parliament and police offices, foreign embassies, banks offices, gun shops, and prisons, the attack intensity increases, and the affected areas multiply. (5) The types of terrorist organizations are diversified. Tallinn, director of Strategic Research Institute of Kazakhstan President, and Central Asian Security Expert believes that the Central Asian terrorist organizations can be divided into three categories: (a) Terrorist groups, such as the Uzbek Islamic Movement receives military training in foreign countries, with combat experience, a terrorist action plan and purpose, professional and powerful destructive ability, and are able in a short period of time to organize an effective attack. (b) Groups are made up of religious extremists, have neither military training nor hot weapons, the destructive ability is not as big, but also very dangerous. (c) The criminal gangs inspired by the religious extremist ideology. In 2016 the Aktobe and Almaty incidents are combination of the second and third types.

The whereabouts of firewall loopholes in Central Asian security

The main reasons that Central Asian security incidents occur frequently are that the "firewalls" of every Central Asian country, the "firewalls" among Central Asian countries and "firewalls" between Central Asian countries and the outside world have loopholes in the following specific terms:

First, governmental governance and

security prevention and control capabilities are weak, strict prevention and control along the borders can hardly be achieved, and corruption gets more prominent, etc. In addition, some countries are unwilling to admit the existing three forces or unwilling to admit the seriousness of the problems, leading to the ineffective mobilization of the whole society to combat.

Second, religious extremism has a more favorable environment. The extremists propagate extreme thinking under the banner and cover of promoting Islam.

Third, political, economic, ethnic and religious issues increase the difficulty of security prevention and control. Some political forces intend to seek power through violence, such as the opposition party in Tajikistan. Economic structure is relatively single-handed, and economic growth is weak. Russia's stagnant economy leads to a large number of migrant workers in Russia to return home countries, which deteriorate the employment situation, and increase social unrest. Ethnic relations get complex, including the relationship between the main ethnic groups and other ethnic groups, the relationship between different nationalities in the border areas, and the relationship between the local ethnic groups and foreign nationals. With the increasingly close exchanges between Central Asian countries and the outside world, some foreign religions and emerging religions have developed rapidly in Central Asia, but the religious tolerance in some local areas has declined.

Fourth, Central Asia has not yet formed an effective security safeguards system. Because of their differences in territory, boundary, water resources, energy and transportation, the mutual relations among Central Asian countries are complex and they fail to establish a unified security cooperation system. For example, over 300 km border between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, there are 56 sections to be delimited. And 93.8 kilometers of border between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have to be demarcated. Along the borders between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, there

are often mistaken shots and injures, resulting in disputes. The Central Asian countries' participation in international security cooperation mechanism covers only some localities and individual fields. Under this circumstance, the Central Asian countries in the security aspect basically have to rely on their own, which leads to criminal activities committed by extremists and terrorists on the run in Central Asia, and who play "hide and seek" games with the governments.

Fifth, external environment deteriorates.

Russia and the West enter the so-called "new cold war". Europe is troubled by the refugees problem, while UK by the Brexit problem. Changes have taken place in the military and geopolitical balance of the Black Sea and the Caspian sea. Some local areas of Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine and others are in war state, the attempted coup in Turkey failed, Azerbaijan and Armenia saw conflict in the Nagorno Karabakh area, and internal separatist problems in Georgia and Moldova become complex. World economic situation is in downturn, China's economic growth is slowdown, and the Russian economy is in stagnation.

The short term security situation is controllable, but long-term uncertainty is enhanced

Since Central Asia's firewalls have loopholes, then does it mean that the security situation in Central Asia will continue to deteriorate or even become Afghanistanized? It is foreseeable that the short term security situation is controllable, and fairly serious unrest is unlikely to appear, but the uncertainty of long-term security situation in Central Asia is enhanced.

Uzbekistan is expected to successfully hold presidential election to achieve a smooth administrative transition. Reasons are mainly the following:

Firstly, President Karimov had made legal preparations for power transfer. On December 29, 2015, Uzbekistan passed the amendment to the presidential election law, reducing the qualifications of presidential candidates, paving a smooth way for the transfer of power. After the death of President Karimov, the Uzbekistan

Electoral Commission announced the presidential election on December 4, 2016 according to the Constitution. Uzbekistan power core is stable, police and military are loyal to the Administration, which provides a strong guarantee for the smooth power transfer. Prime Minister Mirziyoyev and other top officials long follow the President, and work together very well in the past political struggles. Mirziyoyev is currently the acting president, and is nominated by the Liberal Democratic Party as the presidential candidate, very likely to win the upcoming presidential election. The new prime minister, and deputy Prime Minister appointed by Mirziyoyev as acting president are in good terms with each other in favor of the new administration.

Secondly, there is no opposition party in Uzbekistan, the overseas opposition party basically has no appeal inside Uzbekistan. Moreover, the Uzbekistan society is more traditional, popular thinking is for stability, and the general public is unenthusiastic about the political movement. Traditional autonomous "Mahala" mechanism of Uzbekistan throughout the country plays a positive role in promoting social stability.

Thirdly, both Russia and China are actively committed to the stability of Uzbekistan and Central Asia. Russia not only understands the Uzbekistan political situation, but also has a means to affect its political developments. Since 2015, Russia -Uzbekistan relations gets closer. The two sides cooperate with each other in politics, the Russian Government helps the Uzbekistan Government maintain domestic security, the Uzbekistan Government as the rotating chairman of the SCO responds positively to the Russian initiatives. In 2016 Russia exempts Uzbekistan US\$865 million debt. After the death of President Karimov, Russian Prime Minister Medvedev and President Putin visited Uzbekistan respectively, and display through the funeral diplomacy Russian attention and influence on Uzbekistan. China's support in Uzbekistan's political, economic and other fields provides favorable conditions for handover of the administration. Europe and the United States take a wait-and-see posture to

Central Asia, the possibility of rash action to intervene in Central Asia situation is small.

The new generation of Uzbekistan leaders is likely to continue the development model proposed by former President Karimov, insist on the foreign policy of multilateral balance, strive for maximum benefits through the dealings with all parties, and further development of the relationship with neighboring countries of Central Asia in the direction of relaxation. The relations between religious extremism and terrorism as well as political factions, economic and social issues (high unemployment, high inflation, foreign exchange shortages) are the main challenges facing the new administration.

Kazakhstan is expected to achieve a smooth handover of power within 3-5 years. After the government reshuffle, President Nazarbayev's daughter Nazar Baeva serves as chair of the Parliamentary Committee on International Relations, Defense and Security, it is speculated that she is one of the successors to President Nazarbayev. Tribal relations, "color revolution", three forces, slow economic growth and other issues are the main challenges to the Kazakhstan power handover. The Kazakh Government governance ability is strong, Nazarbayev enjoys high prestige, cadres policy and education policy are very fruitful, the opposition party is weak, the public opinion is in favor of stability and development, which are conducive to realization of the smooth handover of power.

The security prevention and control capacity of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan is relatively weak. Tajikistan defines the "Islamist party" (opposition) as an "extremist terrorist organization", and continuously intensifies the crackdown. Kyrgyzstan will hold a presidential election in 2017, President Atambayev states no longer seeking re-election in line with the Constitution. Because the internal factions of Kyrgyzstan are well-matched in strength, there will be fierce competition. Turkmenistan exercises a more strict control on the exchange of information and personnel, so there is little information on the border situation between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan and inside Turkmenistan.

Will new resolutions emerge in the basic problems of Central Asia

From the historical perspective, Central Asian countries have entered a critical period of development, inter-generational replacement will have an important impact on the regional situation. The political and economic world outlook of new generation elite, the balanced measures between national interests and individual interests, and safeguards of the interests are different with those bureaucrats growing up in the Soviet period, they may try to make appropriate adjustments to the domestic and foreign policies. The traditional interests structure of "family - tribe - fellow mate - others" may change.

With the forthcoming inter-generational replacement, will new resolutions emerge in the basic problems of Central Asia, and will problems disappear? An ideal paradigm is: the major countries strengthen cooperation with neighboring countries in Central Asia, and work together for the stability and development of the Central Asian countries; while Central Asian countries enhance coordination so as to establish a unified and effective security protection and maintenance system; Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in the regional politics should no longer "wrestle" with each other, but strengthen bilateral economic cooperation, and jointly promote regional integration; Uzbekistan and two neighboring countries -- Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan -- should shake hands for reconciliation; Uzbekistan provides natural gas for two upstream countries, returns to a unified power grid system of Central Asia, resolves the border issue and the enclave issue through negotiations, clears up land mines in the border areas, guarantees a smooth flow of people and goods along the border; and the two upstream countries give up the large hydropower station plan on the cross-border River and accept Mirziyoyev's idea to solve the power supply problem through constructing small hydropower stations, and in the summer provide water to the downstream countries to ensure agricultural irrigation; Turkmenistan implements an open policy, and together with the Central Asian neighbors

maintain border security and crack down on the religious extremist forces; the Central Asian countries make achievements in the economic restructuring, and gradually get rid of the dependence on international commodity prices and overseas remittances, international loans and aid.

For China, the most pressing issue is how to maintain its growing interests in Central Asia. In recent years, China's investment in Central Asia has grown rapidly, and has become an important investment state and economic and

trade partner of Central Asian countries. Whether Central Asia is stable or not has a growing impact on China's domestic stability and development. However, China's interests safeguards mechanism in Central Asia is still weak. In this regard, many things need to be done, including strengthening civil exchanges and enhancing mutual trust, which is a long-term task.

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A scene of Kyrgyzstan