

THE WEST, RUSSIA AND CHINA IN CENTRAL ASIA: WHAT KIND OF GAME IS BEING PLAYED IN THE REGION?

Igor TORBAKOV*

ABSTRACT

The article deals with the old and new actors of power struggle in Eurasia, and analyses the peculiarities of the 'New Great Game' in detail. In this context, while seeking answers to the questions 'What is the New Great Game', 'What is its essence?', the article makes comparisons to the 'Great Game' which has made its mark on the 19th century, displays the current situation. The author dwells on the perception of interests of regional and global actors, and examines their soft and hard power instruments on the scene, especially looking into the issue of military bases in the region. The article analyzes security as well as geostrategic and economic aspects of the power struggle of three major actors, United States, Russia and China, with respect to regional policies and inter-relations of these countries. Russian-Chinese relations, especially on the issue of security, are emphasized, and their attitude towards the West and particularly the United States is analyzed. In this context, the events experienced in Central Asian republics particularly Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and the competition enforced on Turkmenistan are addressed in the article. The political future and frame of the region is analyzed and the imagery of the Great Game. In its classic 19th century version, the Game was primarily a rivalry between the two major colonial powers – the British and Russian empires -- for control over Central Eurasia.¹ The present-day interpretations of the Great Game tend to expand the number of players -- bringing in such regional heavyweights as China, as well as the key outside power, the United States -- but retain the Game's main characteristic feature – namely, the big powers jockeying

* He is a freelance journalist and researcher who specializes in CIS political affairs.

¹ See, for example, Daniel Kimmage, "Central Asia: Is Regional Turbulence Return of the Great Game?", *RFE/RL*, 19 July 2005. Idem, "2005 in Review: The Geopolitical Game in Central Asia", *RFE/RL*, 29 December 2005.

for position in Central Asia.² The latest conceptualization sees the Game as being largely driven by the desire of Russia and China to squeeze the United States out of Central Asia and establish their exclusive control over the strategically located and energy-rich region.³

What is the Essence of the Great Game?

According to most analysts, a key element of the Great Game is outside powers' security presence in the region -- whether military bases or joint war games with host countries or arms deliveries or control of energy transit routes.

Geopolitically, security presence allows an outside power to exercise more control over a host country's policies and make sure the outside power's national interests are observed and promoted in the host country.

Economically, security presence allows an outside power to ensure that Central Asia's energy riches are exported in the direction the outside power wants; an outside power usually seeks to make sure such deliveries are safe and that other outsiders cannot easily reroute the region's energy flows.

In military-strategic terms, security presence allows an outside power to project force from a host country to other countries in the region, including the outside power's rivals.

Are We Witnessing the Latest Variety of the Great Game?

The present-day outside powers do indeed seek to expand their security presence in Central Asia. A more critical glance would reveal, however, that the Great Game concept appears to ignore a number of important points.

First, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asian states have become independent actors capable of making their own decisions.⁴

Second, the relations between the Central Asian states and the outside powers are not the hierarchical ones in the tradition of a great power – client relationship. The nature of these relations, rather, likely depends more on how the regional

² Frederick Kempe, "Central Asia Emerges As Strategic Battleground", *Wall Street Journal*, 16 May 2006; Nicholas Schmidle, "In Central Asia, New Players, Same Game", *Washington Post*, 19 January 2006; Nikolai Sokov, "The Not-So-Great Game in Central Asia", *PONARS*, Policy Memo No. 403, December 2005; Stanley A. Weiss, "Don't Play This Great Game", *International Herald Tribune*, 9 December 2005; Igor Torbakov, "Central Asia: Replaying the Great Game", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 2, No: 190, 13 October 2005.

³ Ann Scott Tyson, "Russia and China Bullying Central Asia, U.S. Says", *Washington Post*, 15 July 2005; F. William Engdahl, "Central Asia, Washington, and Beijing Energy Geopolitics", *GlobalResearch.ca*, 19 December 2005.

⁴ Dosym Satpayev, "Effekt prisutstviya", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 27 March 2006.

countries perceive their political, economic and security interests. Sometimes the regional countries' interests might indeed include pitting great powers against one another, thereby creating an image of a great game.

Third, more recently, the diverging trajectories of Central Asian states have made the situation even more precarious and confused.

Fourth, the geopolitical 'game' played by the outside powers does not have an unequivocally confrontational character. To be sure, the competition between the big powers does exist but at the same time there is an understanding that cooperation is a must to prevent further destabilization of the already dangerously volatile region.⁵

So What's the Current Situation on the Ground?

Currently, Moscow and Beijing's positions in Central Asia seem to be strong, and will likely grow stronger in the near future.⁶ By contrast, the West (the U.S. and the EU) appears to be in strategic retreat at the moment.⁷ To understand why it is so, one has to focus on the interests of the Central Asian ruling regimes and analyze how, in light of these interests, the regional leaders perceive the policies of the key outside powers.

Currently, Central Asia's leaders have three primary concerns: they seek to perpetuate their rule over their countries while blocking attempts by political opposition to topple their regimes; they intend to continue combating radical Islamist activity; they want to further economic development in such a way that will not undermine their control over their own economies.

The West, particularly the United States, is actively calling for political change in the region, and Washington is more concerned with having Central Asian governments' help in its struggle against militant Islamists than in providing security assistance for the regional regimes at home. The West also wants the local economies to be liberalized, which would require domestic elites to sacrifice control over regional economic processes. Russia, on the other hand, is doing the opposite, and has therefore won regional governments' appreciation.⁸

⁵ Alexei Malashenko, "Tsentralnaya Aziya: nikto ne khotel pobezhdat", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 16 January 2006.

⁶ Alan Cullison, "Russia Reclaims Its Backyard", *Wall Street Journal*, 2 September 2005.

⁷ Jeremy Page, "Three Powers In Replay of Great Game", *Times*, 12 July 2005; "U.S. Under Pressure in Central Asia", *Jane's Intelligence Digest*, 4 November 2005.

⁸ America's overall strategy in Central Asia is discussed in: Svante E. Cornell, "The United States and Central Asia: In the Steppes to Stay?", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol: 17, No: 2, July 2004. The Russian critique of U.S. policies in the region see in: Andrei Grozin, "The "New" U.S. Strategy in Central Asia", *RIA Novosti*, 4 April 2006.

While the West is pushing for democratic reforms in the autocratically ruled region, Moscow hasn't demonstrated any inclination to interfere in Central Asia's domestic politics by demanding improvements in human rights or the implementation of political competition. This difference alone makes the choice between the two potential sponsors an obvious one for Central Asia's authoritarian governments. (Russian strategists claim that American policy aimed at spreading democracy in Central Asia failed like it did in the entire region of the Greater Middle East because Washington was slow to understand that democratization which comes before modernization in the poor underdeveloped countries cannot be sustained.)⁹

In terms of security, the United States has shown no interest in helping regional governments defend themselves from the challenges posed by domestic opposition forces. And the U.S. response to the uprising in Andijan in May 2005 was a primary factor in pushing the region more toward Moscow, as Washington's reaction made it clear to Central Asia's regimes that they would not be able to count on the United States for security assistance during potential emergencies.¹⁰ Furthermore, governments across the region, whether rightly or wrongly, believe the United States is supporting anti-government movements that these regimes see as coalitions between Islamist and pro-Western forces.

While the West reacted to the events in Andijan by criticizing the Uzbek government's ruthless response, Moscow was supportive of the regime, and made it clear that it would help Central Asian governments to fight the Islamist opposition.¹¹ This was formalized in the July 2005 summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Kremlin also has made this commitment through the Collective Security Treaty Organization.¹²

Furthermore, Moscow has taken concrete steps by participating in the joint counterterrorism exercises in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and by increasing military cooperation.¹³ The contrast between Washington and Moscow's positions was plain to the regional governments. (For Russia, this cooperation serves national security interests as much as it does political interests in reducing U.S. influence in

⁹ Joel Brinkley, "Russia Battles U.S. Democracy Efforts", *International Herald Tribune*, 5 December 2005.

¹⁰ Sonni Efron, "Uzbekistan Tests U.S. Policy Goals", *Los Angeles Times*, 13 June 2005. Stephen Schwartz & William Kristol, "Our Uzbek Problem", *Weekly Standard*, 6 June 2005.

¹¹ Mikhail Margelov, "Uzbekistanu pora menyat geopolitiku", *Parlamentskaya Gazeta*, 18 May 2005.

¹² Viktoria Panfilova, "Fantom ekspansii ne ostanovil Moskvu", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 6 July 2005; Yevgenii Verlin, "Vostok-Zapad: Vpolzaniye v Aziyu", *Vedomosti*, 13 July 2005.

¹³ "Russia's Institutional Offensive in Central Asian Security", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 1 May 2006.

the region. Moscow seeks to prevent the security breakdown in Central Asia: any significant political upheaval in the region, the Kremlin strategists argue, would make Russia's southern frontier vulnerable to an assault of militant Islamists moving north from Afghanistan. Russia and Kazakhstan share a very long border, and Central Asian security is therefore of vital interest to Russia.)

But the most significant difference has recently been in terms of economic cooperation. Economic aid from the West in general and the United States in particular is now viewed rather skeptically by governments in the region. Central Asian officials complain that Western aid never lives up to the expectations, as the bulk of it tends to be reserved for the numerous, and quite expensive, Western consultants. Furthermore, the aid is vulnerable to wide-spread corruption, which prevents it from reaching its destination. On top of this, the monies often come with significant strings attached. The latter sometime include demands for political and economic reform that the local leadership perceives as being potentially detrimental as it risks to undermine regional governments. Also, economic benefits from the presence of U.S. military bases turned out to be less than anticipated -- as it happens, the local expectations were grossly exaggerated. Other benefits, such as employment of the local population at the Western military facilities, were not crucial to the host countries' economies. On the other hand, trade with Russia and China remains a vital element of economic development for all the Central Asian states.

Moscow, relying on a vast resource base built due to the windfall energy revenues, is currently seeking to strengthen economic ties between Russia and Central Asia. As one commentary contends, Russia's new expansion in Central Asia is propped not so much by its military might, which remains rather inadequate as by its economic dynamism, driven by the powerful energy sector.¹⁴

With Russia's major gas reserves steadily depleting and the development of the untapped fields in the Arctic being extremely costly, Gazprom, Russia's state-run energy monopoly, is increasingly turning its gaze to Central Asia's gas riches. Russia has already signed a massive gas pact with Turkmenistan: under the terms of the 2003 accord, Moscow got what seemed to be the exclusive right to export all natural gas produced in Turkmenistan for the period of 25 years. But the mercurial nature of the Turkmen president, Saparmurat Niyazov, makes him an extremely inconvenient and unpredictable partner, which forces Moscow to look for a back up plan.

¹⁴ Pavel K. Baev, "Russia's Counterrevolutionary Offensive in Central Asia", *PONARS*, Policy Memo No. 399, December 2005.

Thus, in January 2006, Gazprom signed two agreements with Uzbekistan pledging \$1.5 billion in Russian investments in the Uzbek energy sector. The most important accord is a 25-year production sharing agreement on the development of the Ustyurt gas fields. Most Russian energy analysts applauded the deal. Any investments Gazprom makes in the region, they argue, increase the company's influence and make the local authorities more loyal. In addition, with the Ustyurt gas reserves in its possession, Gazprom will be able to at least partially protect its interests and keep its gas balance should the Turkmen gas production drop. The deal is also attractive for Tashkent, the analysts say: Uzbekistan simply lacks funds both for the exploration and development of its energy reserves and, more importantly, for the expansion of the throughput capacity of the Central Asia – Center pipeline's Uzbek section to secure the export of fuel.¹⁵

But even before inking a gas accord with Uzbekistan, Russia managed to sign another energy agreement that has potentially huge economic and political implications. In the end of 2005, Gazprom reached a five-year transit deal with Kazakhstan's state natural gas transit company KazMunaiGas to transit 55 billion cubic meters of Turkmen and Uzbek natural gas a year, giving Gazprom monopoly control over all three Central Asian states' natural gas exports.¹⁶ As some analysts note, this agreement represents the virtual completion of Russia's successful efforts to forge something like a gas cartel of producers. Playing a leading role within this grouping, Russia would not only dominate the export of Central Asian gas but would also obtain control over the economies of both the gas-producing and gas-consuming states in the post-Soviet Eurasia.¹⁷

The forming of the Russia-led gas cartel will likely have significant repercussions for other major consumers – like, for example, the European Union. According to one perceptive commentary, 'All natural gas produced in the former Soviet Union comes from Gazprom, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan, with any natural gas originating in a country ending in 'stan' having to transit through Kazakhstan and Russia on its way to any market. The KazMunaiGas deal means that Gazprom -- and by extension, the Kremlin -- now owns all of that gas. Any state wanting to use Central Asian gas in order to get energy independence from Russia is now out of luck.'¹⁸

This situation doesn't bode well for the countries such as Ukraine and the Baltic States: it would appear that these nations are now deprived of any viable

¹⁵ Yelena Mazneva, "Gazprom stavit na Uzbekistan", *Vedomosti*, 26 January 2006.

¹⁶ Nataliya Grib & Oleg Gavrish, "Vse gazy v gosti budut k nam", *Kommersant*, 14 November 2005.

¹⁷ Stephen Blank, "Russia Realizes its Cartel", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 30 November 2005.

¹⁸ "The Far-Reaching Changes in Russia", *Stratfor*, 14 November 2005.

alternatives to Russian-owned natural gas. The January 2006 standoff between Russia and Ukraine over the gas pricing which resulted in a brief cutoff of supplies that affected even a number of the EU countries served as a powerful wake-up call for any nation that is dependent on Moscow for its energy needs.

In military-strategic terms, the situation in the Central Asian region has also changed quite dramatically over the past year. In 2002-2004, Moscow's attempts to counterbalance the U.S. military presence were doomed to failure, as the new Russian air base in Kant, Kyrgyzstan was vastly inferior to U.S. and NATO's facilities set up in the region in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks against the U.S. But 2005 has seen an impressive reassertion of Russian military influence in Central Asia.¹⁹

The most significant development was Uzbekistan's geopolitical shift. The U.S.-Uzbek 'strategic partnership' forged in March 2002 was seen by many security experts in both countries as an effective geostrategic leverage helping balance Russia and China in the region. The Karimov government, however, strongly resisted attempts to use the 'alliance' for promoting liberal reforms and human rights. Having suppressed the Ferghana Valley riots, which he asserted was an attack of the 'external radical Islamist forces,' Karimov promptly revived the 'strategic partnership' with Moscow and received a red-carpet welcome in Beijing. As a direct result of Tashkent's falling out with Washington, the U.S. airbase at Karshi-Khanabad has been withdrawn.²⁰ The growing security ties between Russia and Uzbekistan have ultimately culminated in the military pact between the two countries which was signed in November 2005.²¹ Additionally, a number of military exercises comprising Russian and Central Asian contingents were conducted in the fall of 2005, and the first joint Russian-Chinese maneuvers added a new dimension to this cooperation.²²

Dilemmas of Russian Policy

In spite of the apparent success in restoring its great power stature, Russia's seemingly dominant position in Central Asia is far from guaranteed. In fact,

¹⁹ Richard Giragosian, "The Strategic Central Asian Arena", *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol: 4, No: 1, 2006.

²⁰ Alex Rodriguez, "U.S. Shuts Down Uzbek Air Base", *Chicago Tribune*, 23 November 2005.

²¹ Igor Torbakov, "Russia's Warming toward Uzbekistan May Damage Relations with the West", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 16 November 2005. Igor Torbakov, "Uzbekistan Emerges as Russia's New 'Strategic Bridgehead' in Central Asia", *EurasiaNet*, 14 December 2005.

²² Antoine Blua, "Russia/China: Military Exercises Underscore Growing Ties", *RFE/RL*, 5 August 2005.

Moscow will hardly succeed in maintaining its leadership role unless it sorts out a number of contradictory aspects of its policy towards the Central Asian states.

First, Russian strategy in Central Asia appears to be resting on a shaky foundation. It seeks to preserve the status quo and help perpetuate the regimes that have sworn geopolitical allegiance to Moscow. But what does the status quo actually mean? Its essence, some experts contend, is the 'ossification of post-Soviet ruling elites' and the decay of the political systems they shaped for their convenience. The perpetuation of the unreformed local regimes is exactly the root cause of the brewing political crisis in the region.²³ Russia, too, runs the risk of being too closely allied with the regional rulers. For example, having pledged to support Karimov, the Kremlin will inevitably find itself between the rock and the hard place when his regime eventually crumbles and social turmoil ensues. Then Russia will face a painful dilemma: to come to Karimov's rescue would mean to be drawn into a possibly violent internal conflict; to ignore the request for help would mean to badly let one's ally down. Having signed an alliance pact with Karimov, one commentary argues, 'Russia automatically made a possible civil war in Uzbekistan its internal problem.'²⁴ Besides, Moscow's readiness to embrace any local autocrat may well prove to be a bad miscalculation – simply because such an alliance is unlikely to last too long. As one observer points out, 'Russia remains primarily a fallback option.'²⁵ The long-term preferences of Central Asian elites would ultimately be pulling them toward the West.²⁶

Second, despite the fact that Moscow and Beijing have managed, so far, to find a degree of accommodation, the competition between the two powers in Central Asia is all but inevitable. Russia will likely have to struggle pretty hard to maintain its strategic standing on par with China. As most historians would contend, China is not emerging -- it is re-emerging to reclaim its traditionally exceptional place in the

²³ The critical analysis of the downsides of Russia's Central Asia policy, see in: Dmitry Furman, "Podderzhka obrechennykh", *Izvestiya*, 15 June 2005.

²⁴ Mikhail Zygar, "Rezhimnye subyekty", *Kommersant*, 14 November 2005.

²⁵ Nikolai Sokov, "The Not-So-Great Game in Central Asia", *PONARS*, Policy Memo, No: 403, December 2005.

²⁶ Remarkably, the recent report by Russia's influential Council for Foreign and Defense Policy criticized Russia's approach to Central Asia for "lacking strategic vision and reacting to events and work on a case to case basis." The report warns that political destabilization is currently the main threat in Central Asia with authoritarian and ineffective rule seen as a cause. "Despite apparent external stability, many ruling regimes in Central Asia could quite easily be shaken or even toppled," it says. "Russia should carefully but persistently persuade the Central Asian regimes of the need for political modernization," the report suggests. See *Interfax*, 3 March 2006.

region. China was a presence in Central Asia 'ever since the Silk Road first connected the Middle Kingdom to the Roman Empire.'²⁷

While some Moscow strategists talk of a Chinese alliance against the West, 'China has been taking advantage of that misperception and preparing for a world in which Russia no longer matters.'²⁸ China has been building rail lines and petroleum pipelines into Central Asia and acquiring Central Asian energy firms. According to various estimates, China National Petroleum has invested almost \$10 billion in Kazakhstan since 1997. In October 2005, Beijing scored a major geopolitical coup when China completed a \$4.18 billion takeover of PetroKazakhstan Inc. This move was followed by the opening of the new Kazakh-China oil pipeline on December 15.²⁹

China quietly sponsors an unofficial policy of encouraging migration of its citizens to Central Asia as well as to the resource-rich but sparsely populated Russian Siberia. Russia, on whose vast expanses between the Ural Mountains and the Far East live less than 30 million people, cannot fail to feel a tremendous demographic pressure from across the border with China. And in Kazakhstan, there are reportedly around 100,000 Chinese who have settled there recently.³⁰

China is purchasing components of Russian military technology as part of a broad-based modernization program. According to one Western commentary, 'China is fully engaged in the old three-player game and views Washington as its major concern, with Russia being simply a tool of foreign policy.'³¹ Some Russian analysts share this view and are quite pessimistic about the long-term prospects of Sino-Russian 'cooperation.' Even if Moscow does manage to increase its influence in Central Asia in the short-term, Beijing will likely be the biggest geopolitical winner in the long run, they say. Russia, being China's junior partner, will inevitably be forced to gradually cede both its dominant position in the region and access to Central Asia's enormous energy resources to its much more powerful ally. Thus, what now appears to look like a return of the Soviet Union's 'soft underbelly' to Mother Russia's fold is rather a slow but steady process of transformation of Central Asian region into Beijing's expanded zone of influence.³²

²⁷ Georgi Derluguian, "Shifting Forces along the Silk Road", *Moscow Times*, 5 August 2005.

²⁸ "The Far-Reaching Changes in Russia", *Stratfor*, 14 November 2005.

²⁹ See Stephen Blank, "China Makes Policy Shift, Aiming to Widen Access to Central Asian Energy", *EurasiaNet*, 13 March 2006.

³⁰ On China's expansion see: Alexei Malashenko, "Tsentralnaya Aziya: nikto ne khotel pobezhdat", *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 16 January 2006. Idem, "Kitai, kotoryi myagko stelet", *Moskovskie Novosti*, 21 April 2006.

³¹ "The Far-Reaching Changes in Russia", *Stratfor*, 14 November 2005.

³² Andrei Tsukanov, "Kitai otkroet Kremlyu svoe istinnoe litso", *Prognosis.ru*, 7 June 2005.

Third, Russia will ultimately need to decide whether it genuinely wants to push the United States from Central Asia, or whether it can live with the U.S. presence in the region. Pragmatically defined Russian interests, some analysts suggest, are not necessarily incompatible with U.S. interests in Central Asia.³³ True, Moscow wouldn't like to see the strengthening of U.S. positions in the region where it traditionally dominates, they argue; but it should also be clear, they add, that Russia isn't prepared and in fact doesn't want to bear the full responsibility for securing political stability and economic development in Central Asia. Thus, the argument goes, in reality the Kremlin is interested both in preserving a 'certain level' of American presence in Russia's strategically sensitive 'southern underbelly' and in maintaining some sort of partnership with the U.S. One policy paper published in the recent issue of the journal *Rossiia v globalnoi politike* even argues that in the majority of the Central Asian states Moscow should try to either share the responsibility for the regional stability with the outside 'third force' – be it China, the U.S., or the EU – or shun this burden altogether. There are Russian experts who even suggest offering to the U.S. a status of observer in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Any attempt by the SCO 'to squeeze Washington out of Central Asia' would be counter-productive, they contend. If this happens, 'an extremely dangerous geopolitical vacuum will emerge in the region.'³⁴

Finally, Russia as well as other outside powers will have to pursue their interests in the region whose countries diverge widely in their geopolitical orientation. According to some observers, the most significant development of the last year is the parting of ways among Central Asian states themselves. But although the individual trajectories of the regional countries do differ markedly, all Central Asian states appear to have opted for the tactics of sophisticated foreign-policy maneuvering. According to one recent commentary, a policy whereby a regional state would be geopolitically tethered to a single outside power is receding to the past. Thus, it starts slowly dawning on the great powers that they cannot achieve their goals pursuing a 'single Central Asian' policy in the region; instead, they need to elaborate a set of policies targeting individual Central Asian states.³⁵

Here's a brief overview of what some Central Asian policymakers and analysts call a 'pragmatic strategy' pursued by the regional countries. At first blush, Turkmenistan continues sticking to its precarious neutrality status, remaining in a kind of self-isolation. But Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov's recent

³³ Sergei Karaganov, "O Rossii, SShA i Tsentralnoi Azii", *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 20 October 2005.

³⁴ Sergei Karaganov, "Tsentralnaya Aziya: Vozvrashchenie Rossii", *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 9 December 2005.

³⁵ Dosym Satpayev, "Effekt prisutstviya", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 27 March 2006.

overtures toward China including the signing of the long-term gas accord with Beijing indicate that Ashgabat seeks to break Russia's monopoly on the exports of Turkmenistan's natural gas.³⁶ While reiterating that Moscow is their main strategic partner, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan continue to maintain a close relationship with the United States. Kazakhstan, politically the most stable and economically the most powerful nation of the region, seeks to preserve the multi-vector character of its foreign policy and economic development. Despite persistent pressure from Moscow, Kazakh leadership leaves open the possibility of exporting oil through the newly opened Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. Some energy analysts do not exclude the future competition between Moscow and Astana. Putin wants to turn Russia into an energy superpower, they say. But Kazakhstan also possesses huge amounts of oil and gas that will likely compete on the world markets with the Russian hydrocarbons.³⁷ For the time being, only Uzbekistan appears to have cast its lot with Russia and China. But this trend is unlikely to last too long. Besides, Karimov, the Uzbek strongman, will likely not miss the opportunity to play Moscow off against Beijing to create more favorable geopolitical conditions for his regime.

CONCLUSION

The great powers do indeed compete in Central Asia and go out of their way to expand and strengthen their security presence there. The above analysis would suggest, however, that the 19th century Great Game model is an inadequate epistemological tool for understanding the 21st century tangled interactions in the region. The current pattern of relations between various international actors is much more complex than a traditional geopolitical tug-of-war between the old colonial empires.

Over the past year, Russia, claiming that its paramount strategic goal is regional stability, has achieved much success in consolidating its influence across Central Asia. This success, however, appears to be temporary as is the current period of stability. Russia's policies aimed at preserving the status quo (read the stability of the powers that be) fail to address Central Asia's socio-political problems – above all, the pervasive corruption and the over-concentration of power in the hands of the ruling elites -- that cause broad public discontent and may eventually lead to a major political upheaval.

³⁶ Alexei Grivach, "Kladovaya Turkmenbashi", *Vremya Novostei*, 4 April 2006; Stephen Blank, "Turkmenbashi in Beijing: A Pipeline Dream," *EurasiaNet*, 10 April 2006.

³⁷ Alexander Rahr, "V budushchem konkurenciya mezhdu Rossiei i Kazahstanom vpolne veroyatna", *Gazeta*, 6 December 2005.

While Moscow's strategic clout has grown recently, the capacity of the West (the U.S. and the EU) to influence political developments in the region has significantly diminished. However, the overall situation in Central Asia remains highly volatile and the present-day geopolitical landscape is far from being permanent.

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