

The Not-So-Great Game in Central Asia

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The recent request of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to the United States to set deadlines for the temporary use of its bases in Central Asia, and Uzbekistan's subsequent demand that the United States vacate its Karshi-Khanabad (K2) base came as a shock and triggered talk in Washington about a great game, similar to the great power competition between the Russian Empire and Great Britain over the same region in the 19th century. This time the great game is conceptualized as the desire of Russia and China to squeeze the United States out of Central Asia and keep the region under their exclusive control. Moscow denies that it is playing such a great game.

Ironically, between the fall of 2001 and the spring of 2005 the roles were reversed: Moscow accused the United States of expanding its influence into the soft underbelly of Russia. The United States denied the accusation, saying that the notion of the great game was outdated; unlike in the 19th century, Central Asian states were now independent, sovereign actors that could make their own choices. It seems that frameworks and terms change with the changing of policy tides.

A more dispassionate glance would reveal, however, that both conceptualizations miss important points. First, both sides are, for a variety of reasons, concerned about being excluded from Central Asia and view the strengthening of positions of the other side with concern. Second, Central Asian states are, indeed, independent actors capable of making their own decisions. Sometimes their interests might include pitting great powers against one another, thereby creating an image of a great game.

This image of a great game is continually reproduced by all parties involved, due to psychological, ideological, and domestic reasons. More recently, the diverging trajectories of Central Asian states have made the situation even more precarious. A further complication is the appearance of new outside actors, notably India, Pakistan, and Iran. Unless great powers make a serious effort to check impulses toward competition, stability will remain an elusive goal, and attention and resources will be consumed by unending maneuvering and jockeying for the upper hand.

Russian-Chinese Interaction in Central Asia

Russia is still perhaps the most influential actor in the region, although its influence is sometimes seen as greater than it actually is. Ten years ago, Russia embarked on a radically new course with regard to Central Asia by allowing and even encouraging Chinese involvement in the region. The role of China was institutionalized in the Shanghai Five. An informal arrangement of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, the Shanghai Five grew out of an effort to resolve border disputes and reduce armed forces. Areas of cooperation were expanded in 1998 to economic cooperation and containment of religious extremism, a euphemism for Islamic movements coming from Taliban-dominated Afghanistan.

In hindsight, the creation of the Shanghai Five was a seminal event. For the first time Moscow conceded that it could not maintain exclusive influence in Central Asia, as it had originally hoped. China was considered the least of several evils. Moscow feared that it was losing Central Asian governments to the United States, which could provide technical expertise, assistance, and investment at a level incomparable with that which Moscow could offer. The other threat was the spreading of radical Islamic movements supported by the Taliban. There was a significant risk that Islamic opposition would overwhelm governments in the region, and then Russia would have faced the Taliban across almost non-existent borders to the south.

China, in contrast, was not so powerful that it could deny Russian influence in Central Asia. Chinese economic and political resources could, on the other hand, help prop up governments and prevent them from shifting their preferences and loyalties to Washington. This arrangement was equally beneficial to Beijing. It could now more effectively penetrate the region, something it had tried to do since 1992, with Russia helping instead of resisting. China also shared both of Russia's concerns: it wanted to see neither Central Asia falling under the influence of the United States nor the triumph of Islamic radicalism.

The efforts culminated in the transformation of the Shanghai Five into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in June 2001. At that time, Uzbekistan also joined, visibly demonstrating the value of the new

arrangement, as only two years earlier Uzbekistan had left the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a linchpin of Russian presence in the region.

The success of 2001 proved to be short-lived, however. In the fall of that year the United States established bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and acquired overflight rights from Tajikistan. That decision by Central Asian states followed on the heels of an (over)confident statement by Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov that a U.S. military presence in the former Soviet Union was out of the question. After that, the United States quickly disposed of everyone's biggest headache, the Taliban, after years of Russian powerlessness.

Contrary to Moscow's fears, the United States did not actively try to push Russia out of the region. For example, it did not resist the establishment of a Russian base in Kant, Kyrgyzstan, making that country the only one in the world with U.S. and Russian military bases virtually side by side. Instead, governments in the region themselves began to sever their earlier ties with Russia. In perhaps the most visible example of this, Tajikistan demanded termination of the special status of Russian troops in Tajikistan, requested payment for use of a Russia's military base (the 201st division), and demanded that Russian border guards be removed and replaced by Tajik border guards (a process that ended in the summer of 2005). The very presence of the United States in the region effectively led to a weakening of Russian and Chinese influence. These steps were classified in Washington as evidence that Central Asian states were sovereign actors and that there was no great game afoot.

By the summer of 2005 the situation once again began to change:

- The SCO became an attractive partner for more states, including India, Pakistan, Iran, and even Afghanistan. Russia and China felt sufficiently self-confident to push through a collective request to the United States to consider the withdrawal of its military bases.
- The change of power in Bishkek (the Tulip Revolution), which followed similar events in Georgia and Ukraine, concerned both Moscow and Beijing and led them to redouble their efforts to limit U.S. influence in the region. The new government in Bishkek demonstrated that Russian and Chinese influence matter. At least initially, Kyrgyzstan felt compelled to vocally support the SCO declaration on U.S. bases.
- Economic benefits from the presence of U.S. bases turned out to be less than anticipated (as usual, expectations were overinflated). For example, the payments to Uzbekistan for K2 amounted to \$38.7 million, of which only \$15.7 million was actually paid. The payment of the balance of \$23 million from

January 2003 to March 2005 has been held up by the U.S. Congress. Other benefits, such as employment of the local population, were not crucial to the host countries' economies. Trade with Russia and China remains a vital element of economic development for all the Central Asian states.

- Finally, in at least one case (Uzbekistan), cooperation with the United States came into conflict with the goal of regime preservation. Although Islam Karimov would have preferred to keep both, power is more important. In 2004, he lost significant U.S. assistance over his human rights record. In 2005, without second thought, he brutally suppressed demonstrations in Andijon, in spite of the easily anticipated U.S. displeasure. From his point of view, the example of Kyrgyzstan demonstrated that the U.S. presence could be a dangerous one.

Although the situation in Central Asia certainly contains some elements of a great game, the picture is considerably more complicated, primarily because governments in the region do, indeed, make their own choices. Whereas the choice of Islam Karimov favored Russia and China, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, the newly elected president of Kyrgyzstan, tries to maintain a friendly relationship with all three major powers, like his predecessor Askar Akayev. Russia and China can hardly expect that Kyrgyzstan would firmly take their side: Bakiyev does not face the same stark choices as Karimov. However, the United States cannot count on having him on its side either. Tajikistan is likely to display the same attitude: attempts to avoid antagonizing anyone and reap benefits from everyone.

Dilemmas of Russian Policy

In spite of the apparent, if incomplete, success of the last few months, Russian strengths in Central Asia are far from guaranteed. Moscow will have to resolve several contradictions inherent in its current approach.

First, Russia has to fight to maintain equal footing with China. While both countries decided to abandon the dollar in their bilateral trade, Moscow struggled to ensure that both currencies (ruble and yuan) replaced it. Russia seeks to return to southeast Asia as an independent actor, rather than under a Chinese umbrella. The choice of the route for the new oil pipeline in the Far East became a source of contention as Moscow made a conscious effort to avoid dependence on a single customer.

The post-Andijon policy of Uzbekistan might be an early indication of problems Russia is likely to face in the region. While Karimov's two trips to Russia are well known, he also made a trip to Beijing to sign new friendship and energy agreements. Karimov might be trying to play Russia and China against one another in the same way that he tried to

play Russia against the United States in 2004. According to reports in the Russian media, China expressed interest in taking over the base in Khanabad once the United States vacated it. Although these reports were refuted by Chinese officials, the Russian military was apparently sufficiently concerned to move military personnel to the vicinity of that base (these reports are unconfirmed, but plausible).

Russia and China will increasingly diverge in their policies, and the future of the SCO is not as bright as it is often portrayed. The intrigue around the invitation of new observers to the recent SCO summit is probably an early indication of careful behind-the-scenes maneuvering: when Russia proposed to invite India, China immediately insisted on inviting Pakistan. The tentative enlargement of the SCO displayed both the Russian attempt to create a counterbalance to China within the organization and the Chinese attempt to counter-counterbalance that move. Only the invitation of Iran was by mutual consent.

Second, there is an apparent contradiction between Russia's recently announced new approach to post-Soviet states and its old-style policy toward Uzbekistan. Last August, a series of statements from Russian officials indicated the inauguration of a new policy in the post-Soviet space: relations are supposed to be guided by pragmatism and the denial of free rides. Russia supposedly abandoned attempts to preserve and enhance integration at any cost and was apparently prepared to let the Commonwealth of Independent States fade away.

By contrast, Russia's reaction to the overtures of Islam Karimov, who went so far as to propose a military alliance at a recent meeting with Vladimir Putin in St. Petersburg, bears all the hallmarks of the traditional propensity to embrace any self-avowed friend. It is obvious that Karimov turned to Moscow only because he was shunned by the United States. The durability of, and benefits from, such an alliance are highly questionable. Russia remains primarily a fallback option: the preferences of Central Asian leaders lie with Washington, but if that relationship turns sour (as it did for Karimov beginning in 2004), they turn to Moscow. As long as Astana, Bishkek, or Dushanbe do not feel a threat to the stability of their regimes from the United States, they will not switch their preferences to Russia (although they will try to avoid antagonizing Russia and China). Exuberant reports about a new Russian relationship with Uzbekistan closely resemble earlier reports about Serbia in the 1990s or even the earlier pattern of relations between the Soviet Union and third world countries.

Third, perhaps the most significant development of the last year is the parting of ways among Central Asian states themselves. Uzbekistan has moved to the side of Russia and China, at least temporarily. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan maintain a close relationship with the United States. After an initial statement hinting that Kyrgyzstan would like to see the U.S.

withdraw from the Manas base, Bakiyev reaffirmed his acceptance of the U.S. presence, Tajik president Imomali Rakhmonov confirmed overflight rights for the United States and access to facilities, and two hundred French personnel continue to use the Dushanbe airport to support operations in Afghanistan. Relations among Central Asian states have always been uneasy and prone to conflict, but now there is great risk that states that have associated themselves with different great power camps might try to involve their patrons in jockeying for power among themselves.

Fourth, 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. Russia's position did not suffer from the presence of U.S. bases. Russian economic, and even political, interests continued to slowly expand, and its military presence became even more stable with the establishment of regular military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, unlike earlier when Russian troops were deployed with dubious legal status.

Overall, Russian policy in Central Asia is still conceptualized as competition with the United States. Whereas Washington seems to fluctuate between denial and admittance of a great game, Moscow stubbornly sticks to the great game framework. Narrowly and pragmatically defined Russian interests (in line with the August 2005 statements), however, are not necessarily incompatible with U.S. interests in the region. Paradoxically, the more players that are present on the scene (including China, India, Pakistan, and Iran), the more stable the situation will be and the more likely it is that Russia will be able to advance its economic interests and prevent control over the region by an outside power. In the longer run, the U.S. presence might become essential when Russia has to compete with China for influence in Central Asia.

In the final analysis, both U.S. and Russian policies in Central Asia are at a crossroads. Politics in the region are a great game only to the extent that great powers are prepared to frame issues in that manner. Unless both the United States and Russia assume a different attitude toward each other's positions and interests in Central Asia, a Moscow-Beijing axis is likely to form and will create a geopolitical conflict with Washington.