

**Closed Session**

# The New Great Game: China, Russia and the US in Central Asia

*Dr Gürol Baba*





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## Introduction

**C**entral Asia has become a focal point of Asia-Pacific international relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Geographically, the region expands from the Caspian Sea to China, and from Afghanistan to Russia. It canvasses Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In addition to its significant geographical size, the region is also quite rich in energy resources. Due to these very features, the region has become a geo-economic link, which has been acting like a magnet, drawing the attention of several great powers to the region, e.g. the United States (US), China and Russia. These powers' converging and diverging interests fit well into the conceptual and rhetorical title as the 'New Great Game'.

This session was conducted by four significant analysts/researchers/policy practitioners. Along with 20 esteemed participants, they focused upon the rivalry and cooperation of the US, China and Russia in the region. Rather than stressing the historical background of these powers' relations in the region, the discussions revolved around contemporary issues and developments.

The aim of the panel was to discuss how Central Asia dealt with the US, Russia and China in terms of economy and politico-strategic relations. All three great powers have been trying to exert their national interests

in the region. This has required a certain level of cooperation to ensure their success, but has ironically created a more significant level of rivalry. Especially the rise of China has placed this rivalry under the spotlight of increased international attention. The panel discussions revolved around cooperation and rivalry patterns, emphasising that increased cooperation and understanding is required, particularly between the US and China. It was also implied that Russia could act as an interlocutor between these two.

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## The Rising Importance of Central Asia

At the start of the session, the moderator underlined the importance of the region, and the constant interest of the great powers in this region:

*The big power game is back in international relations, and for many centuries the region has been one of the hot spots of international relations. Different interests of big powers of world politics are crossed and competing against each other. In addition to Central Asia there are few other areas where we can witness very similar trends like the Middle East, to some extent Europe, to some extent Africa.*

The competition on Central Asia started not straight after the collapse of the Soviet Union but even a bit earlier. 1979 could be taken as a starting point of this competition. That year, the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan contributed to the kick-start of the 'New Great Game' in Central Asia. Competition in Central Asia did not begin with the collapse of the Soviet Union, but a bit earlier. The year 1979 could be taken as a starting point for this competition. During that year, the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan contributed to the kick-start of the 'New Great Game'.

Regarding the general outlook of China towards Central Asia, the first speaker stated that the Chinese attitude is to mix the east and the west. The speaker underlined that globalization is a tricky term for almost all countries, but particularly the emerging ones, which have been suffered by the uncertainties of the industrialization component of globalization. China's outlook is to reduce this by increasing connectivity between the emerging and industrialized nations. This interconnectivity is particularly important for Central Asian countries, which are landlocked. One very significant of them, due to its large gas reserves, is Kazakhstan. Today's international trade's main item is maritime trade, which means trade by the sea. Thus, the first mission of this connectivity is to help

Central Asian countries to access the sea, the Indian Ocean. These countries together with India and Pakistan are the members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and they are already institutionally connected. Regarding the general outlook of China toward Central Asia, the first speaker stated that the Chinese focus is to mix the East and the West. The speaker underlined that globalisation is a tricky concept for almost all countries; emerging nations in particular have suffered from the uncertainties of the industrialisation component of globalisation. This interconnectivity is particularly important for those Central Asian countries who are landlocked. One very significant country, Kazakhstan, is especially significant due to its gas reserves. Today, maritime trade, or trade by sea, is particularly important. Therefore, the first mission for connectivity is to assist Central Asian countries to the access the sea, in this case the Indian Ocean. The Central Asian countries, along with India and Pakistan, are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and they are already connected through this institution.

The speaker continued that the second meaning of the sea is to provide mutual connectivity. The Central Asian countries are mutually connected. They are not only connected to the sea with the Pakistani-Indian corridor but also mutually connected regarding their facilities. This interconnectivity also aims to bridge the gaps between the members of the SCO. Due to the today's populism in international arena, the gap between the rich and poor is huge, both domestic and internationally. China is also trying to reduce this gap between a lot of countries. China experienced this gap especially during the railway building. In this sense, both Russian Eurasian Economic Union and the Chinese Economic Belt initiatives bring Kazakhstan and many other -stans together via respecting their sovereignty. The speaker went on to say that the sea is also significant in that it provides mutual connectivity. The Central Asia countries are mutually connected. They are not only connected to the sea via the Pakistani-In-

dian corridor, but they are also mutually connected through their facilities. This interconnectivity also bridges the gaps between the members of the SCO. Due to today's populism in the international arena, the gap between the rich and the poor is huge, both domestically and internationally. China is trying to reduce this gap in many countries. China was exposed to this gap, especially during the building of railroads. In this sense, both the Russian Eurasian Economic Union and the Chinese Economic Belt initiatives have brought Kazakhstan and many other 'Stans together by respecting their sovereignty.

The other significance of connectivity is to provide common development and common security. This is important in reducing the suffering of the poor. The SCO, for example, was initially formulated to fight against terrorism and extremism; now it also focuses on integration and economic cooperation. This does not only concern the energy sectors, but also economic zones and the building of infrastructure

and corridors to reduce the gaps in people-to-people connections. According to the speaker, it is a commitment to a shared future. In the formulation of this shared future, China has taken on an important role in which Chinese culture, which is very inclusive, is an important element, despite China's communist past. First, the most important element of this shared future is that all nations must respect each other so that they can coexist. Second, despite differences in religions, the members of this shared future should respect and not compete with each other. Third, the sovereignty of the members must be respected.

The first speaker added that the current developments in communication via the Internet require this sort of interconnectivity among nations. Today's international relations are not more than the 18th or 19th century's zero-sum game. To establish and develop this interconnectivity, more global platforms and partnerships are required.

## US Interests in the Region

Washington's predominant interest is security-related, e.g. maintaining the stability of the region. The US' main concerns in the region are the Islamic fundamentalist groups. This concern surfaced particularly during the post-9/11 era in Afghanistan. Later on, the US tried to develop security relations with Kazakhstan under NATO. Washington expanded its cooperative efforts with Central Asian states under its grand strategy of 'War on Terror' by supporting them for non-proliferations of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and anti-terror programs.

As a natural reaction to the China-Russia alliance's anti-American efforts, Washington has also been trying to prevent a serious increase in Russian and Chinese influence in the region. For this reason, US administrations have attempted to maintain the stability of the Central Asian regimes, as weak or failed regional regimes would open the door for more Russian or Chi-

nese influence. US financial support for these regimes is still continuing, and US cooperation efforts with these regimes have been presented within the framework of NATO's counter-terror strategy. This became

*The US' main concerns in the region are the Islamic fundamentalist groups.*

particularly visible in the post-9/11 era, during which Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan provided air-base access to US-led coalition troops.

In these counter-terror efforts, the US strategic calculations place particular focus upon Islamic movements. The US has considered that radical versions of these movements, which are labelled as Jihadist, have the potential to destabilise regional governments. Al-Qaeda, Taliban, Islamic Jihad Union, as well as the Salafi and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, are some of them. Similar to Russia and China, the US naturally has economic aims in the region, which are more liberal. The US in the region acts as a representative of the West by pushing for free-market access to energy resources, namely the Caspian basin's oil and gas fields. The US tries to promote regional economic cooperation for economic reasons.

Another US aim in the region is to promote democracy. As a traditional trend, US administrations promote liberal democracy among their potential partners. This does not only ease their politico-economic cooperation with the US, but also boosts regional cooperation tendencies with other US partners. In Central Asia, this is particularly important since regional leaders are pro-Russian. A liberal democratic transformation in these countries could reduce Moscow's influence.

Democratisation has been the US' foremost means of establishing and developing pro-Western trends and lifestyles in Central Asian countries. To promote democracy in these countries, the US has also instrumentalised NATO, embracing a post-Cold War and human security/international terrorism orientation. Moreover, the US administrations have utilised direct aid via several agencies in their democratisation efforts under the Freedom Support Act: The National Endowment for Democracy; the Agency for International Development; NGOs, including the Open Society Fund; and other voluntary organisations such as Volunteers for Prosperity and the Peace Corps.

The US aim toward democratisation of Central Asian countries was not only to create more fertile ground for a deeper and more effective influence in the re-

gion, but also to transform the political elites in these countries. A more Westernised elite structure would be able to cooperate better with the US under more American terms.

For these aims, Washington developed a regional cooperation initiative, called as the New Silk Road (NSR). The initiative was proposed after the US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 and aimed to promote stability in Central Asia. The NSR aims to end the bottled-up status of Central Asian countries between Russia and China. For this aim, the NSR would link Central Asia to the Indian Ocean via South Asia. In this link Afghanistan plays a key role, not only as a bridge but also a trade hub. With the NSR, Afghanistan's foreign trade with its neighbours will be boosted which would eventually spill over the prosperity in the region. Increase in economic prosperity would build up and sustain peace. The NSR, rightfully, did not propose a comprehensive regional economic integration due to the diverging interests and priorities of Central Asian countries. Instead it promotes American liberal economic values in the region, which projects a deeper and longer-term transformation of the region into a more Western stance. With these aims in mind, Washington developed a regional cooperation initiative under the name of the New Silk Road (NSR). The initiative was proposed after the US and NATO withdrew from Afghanistan in 2014, and it aimed to promote stability in Central Asia. The goal of the NSR is to decrease the influence of Russia and China in the Central Asian countries. The NSR intends to link Central Asia to the Indian Ocean via South Asia. In this link, Afghanistan plays a key role, not only as a bridge but also as a trading hub. With the NSR, Afghanistan's foreign trade with its neighbours would be boosted, which would eventually lead to prosperity in the region. A continuing increase in economic prosperity would lead to sustained peace. The NSR, rightfully, does not propose a comprehensive regional economic integration due to the diverging interests and priorities of Central Asian countries. Instead, it promotes American liberal economic values in the region, which projects a deeper and long-term transformation toward a more Western model.



## Russia's Influence and Interest in the Region

Unlike the US, Russia has a historical and geographical proximity to the region. However, like the US, it also aims to maintain stability and eliminate fundamentalist radicals in the area. The above-mentioned 'Islamist' groups are also under Moscow's anti-terror scrutiny. For Moscow, the elimination of radical Islamist groups in the region fits into its aims to protect the status quo, i.e. its close relations with the regions' authoritarian government structures. In protecting the status quo, Russia is not alone. Via the SCO, and particularly with China's support, Russia is attempting to diminish US influence in the region. The US may create challenges to Russia's influence if a liberal democratic transformation occurs in some regional countries, even if this is not likely in the short term.

In its relations with the region, Russia has been utilising several techniques, most of which trace back to the USSR era: language, media, religion, historical legacy, and even family links. In addition, Russia provides employment to a great number of Central Asian workers, particularly from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. This policy reduces unemployment in Central Asian countries and contributes to their economies, as workers send home money earned in Russia. The amount of transferred money is greater than the foreign aid these Central Asian countries receive from Russia or the US.

Another organic and demographic link between Russia and the region is due to the Russians who live in Central Asia, especially in Kazakhstan. The Russian administration does not only scrutinise the citizens of these countries, but it has also developed religion and language policies to keep the people's connection with Russia fresh and functional. Kyrgyzstan is the second most important country. Many of its inhabitants are Russian, and they are the third largest minority in the country. They are organised under the umbrella of several ethnically oriented associations and foundations

which represent and promote their Russian cultural inclinations. In this way, they have been providing a means for the Russian administration to intervene in some domestic affairs within these countries, under the guise of 'protecting' the interests of ethnically Russian citizens.

Russian cultural centres and media have also actively operated in the region, promoting Russian cultural values and lifestyle among the non-Russian inhabitants of Central Asian countries. Russian media broadcasts in particular have led Central Asians to see events through a Russian official lens. Russian language and cultural influence permeate social media in the region.

Unlike the American NSR, the Russian regional integration model is more ambitious. The Russian Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) began as a customs union in 2011, and then became an economic union in 2015. It includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The EAEU was modelled on the EU, aiming to develop a single market for goods, services, capital and labour. With this project, Moscow has aimed to be the leading force in the economic integration of the region by means of excluding the US and China.

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## China's Interests and Increasing Rivalry in the Region

China, even more ambitious than the US or Russia, has economic and strategic interests in Central Asia. The region's geographic proximity to China poses both security and economic concerns for Beijing. Central Asia is situated along China's western border, which makes the region's security crucial for China's border security. Central Asia is also an important and very close market for Chinese goods; therefore, its stability is key for Chinese economic revenues.

*Regarding bilateral and multilateral relations, China has concluded agreements with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan for the construction of new pipelines, thus increasing the control of gas flow from these two very significant producers.*

Similar to the US and Russia, China also aims to curtail Islamic radicalism in the region, which has the potential to reduce China's future expansion and influence. Radical Islamist groups do not have the capability or intention to cooperate with the Chinese agenda. Islamic radicals also pose a threat to one of China's major needs, and uninterrupted energy flow from the region.

Similar to Russia, China has also been applying language and culture-oriented policies toward the region. In its language policy, several language courses are offered under the auspices of the Chinese official agencies. For the implementation of this policy, China utilises Confucian rhetoric, emphasising peace in an effort to allay any possible anxieties about growing Chinese domination. Regarding bilateral and multilateral relations, China has concluded agreements with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan for the construction of new pipelines, thus increasing the control of gas flow from these two very significant producers. In addition to these pipelines, China has increased its economic and political clout in the region by providing billions of dollars to Central Asian governments as loans and infrastructural investments.

China is perhaps the most ambitious actor in its regional integration project. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was launched in 2013, which is comprised of two parts: The Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), leading from China to Western Europe; and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which extends from China, through the Indian Ocean, and then toward the Mediterranean Sea. BRI is not only an integration initiative, but also targets policy coordination, infrastructural investments, unimpeded trade and people-to-people exchanges. In other words, the Chinese outlook is far greater than Central Asia, aiming to establish an integrated Eurasia under the control of Beijing.

## China-Russia 'Alliance'

The alliance is quite deeply rooted, tracing back to the early 1990s. After the collapse of the USSR, from 1991 to 1996, Russo-Chinese relations were transformed into a strategic partnership. In 2001, they organised the Shanghai Five, which expanded their relations from bilateral to multilateral. During the same year, the two countries' armies conducted a joint exercise under the sponsorship of the SCO.

Regarding the SCO, the West has diverging interpretations. Some interpretations underline the potential of the organization to limit the US influence in the region particularly with a coordinated Russian-Chinese effort. Some others point out the differing interests of SCO members and therefore downgrade this potential. The interests of members differ particularly due to the rise in oil prices, which increased Central Asian states' clout in international economy and led them look beyond Russia for better commercial deals. Moreover, SCO's statements highlighting that the organization does not aim to establish a military or political alliance or targeting a third party, sort of prove the second claim of the Western analysts. Since, the Central Asian members of the SCO pursue different economic models and see each other as competitors in the energy sector, it seems also difficult that the SCO could establish an efficient economic union.

Regarding the SCO, the West has diverging interpretations. Some interpretations underline the potential of the organisation to limit US influence in the region, particularly with a coordinated Russian-Chinese effort. Some others point out the differing interests of SCO members and therefore downgrade this potential. The interests of members differ especially in respect to the rise in oil prices, which have increased the Central Asian states' clout in the international economy, leading them to look beyond Russia for better commercial deals. Moreover, the SCO's statements highlighting that the organisation does not aim to establish a military or political alliance, or target a third party, seem to prove the second claim of Western analysts. Since the

Central Asian members of the SCO pursue different economic models and view each other as competitors in the energy sector, it seems unlikely that the SCO could establish an efficient economic union.

Apart from the SCO, the China-Russian alliance is an important element, more than a detail of the 'New Great Game'. Although both great powers aim to increase their individual influence in the region, they also cooperate on strategic matters. The key point of this alliance is its anti-American posture. Even if the SCO was established as a security-oriented allegiance, China and Russia utilise it to counterbalance heavy US investments in Central Asian energy sectors. With this coordinated effort, Beijing and Moscow have aimed to achieve more from regional energy sources than the US.

The Chinese-Russian attitude also converges upon their conceptualisation of the domestic transformation of the Central Asian regimes. Both the Russian conception of 'sovereign democracy' and China's 'Beijing consensus' underline similar values. Both attitudes prioritise the non-interference in domestic affairs of SCO members.

The China-Russia alliance also focuses upon combating the Chinese term 'three evils': extremism, separatism, and terrorism in the region. However, the SCO has not been able to provide a regional approach to deal with these issues, only giving attention to them on a domestic scale. The border disputes and continuing tension among SCO members hinder the formulation of larger-scale plan.

On the other hand, cooperation between China and Russia is not hassle-free. The Russian strategy of developing the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which included Russia, Armenia and Belarus, but excluded China, was opposed by Beijing and other members of the SCO. In regard to economic cooperation, Russian and Chinese priorities differ as well. Still, Moscow and Beijing have not been able to establish

multilateral economic cooperation. For economic cooperation, the Russian instrument has been the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc), established in 2005, of which China is not a member. In other words, Russian has been aiming to restore its strategic and economic influence in the post-Soviet realm, implementing its own multilateralism.

On the other hand, China has also been following a similar path within the SCO. Beijing's attempts to develop a SCO Development Fund were not supported by Moscow as such a fund could facilitate Chinese dominance in the organisation. Similarly, Moscow is hesitant to support the Chinese initiative to establish

a free trade zone in Central Asia beginning in 2023; there are similar concerns about potential Chinese domination due to Beijing's assertive export policies. Russian-Chinese rivalry has also surfaced about energy, particularly concerning energy pipelines and transnational energy complexes. China's plans to develop energy transfer routes as alternatives to Russia, especially highlighted by Chinese efforts to conclude pipeline negotiations with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, have raised serious concerns in Moscow. These alternative routes could reduce Russian influence over the flow of Central Asian energy routes, which could eventually decrease Russian politico-strategic clout in the region as a whole.

## China-Russia Alliance vs. the US?

One of the major motivations in the China-Russia alliance was the increasing US focus on Central Asia during the years 1992-2000. However, due to the disputes mentioned above, Moscow and Beijing could not unite effectively enough to counter US influence in the region, even though this influence was not at a level that could overshadow the clout of Russia or China.

The anti-US coalition between Moscow and Beijing in Central Asia has existed mostly on normative terms. Both Asian powers are against US values infiltrating into the region. For example, the 'colour revolutions' of 2003-2005 were viewed by both Russian and China as having been stimulated from abroad. Both Russia and China acted as representatives of the non-Western world to protect the independence and national interests of Central Asian states from Western infiltration.

Because of disagreements on some security and economic decisions made by Beijing, Russia considers the US as a counter-balancing element in the 'New Great Game'. US and NATO agreements with Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have strengthened the West's influence, negatively affecting Beijing's interest. Moscow's relations with Japan, south Korea and the US, although not very substantial, still signal its

attempts to develop an independent Asian great power posture. CSTO-NATO activities, although they have not reached a joint operation level, still provide a good example of Russia's attempts to develop strategic links with the US. In this competition, the US has focused on north-south trade, especially in the last decade. The aim is to link Pakistan and India to Central Asia via Afghanistan. In this way, the US is attempting to achieve a sphere of influence in the region and create a path linking Central Asia to the Indo-Pacific, one of the most important waterways. The US would thereby develop its relations with two of the most influential South Asian powers. With the prospective development of trade, the US trade-oriented approach seems profitable to Central-Asian trade elites. Kazakhstan's demands for American technology and investment during the last couple of years is an important sign. In the strategic sense, the US has been counter-balancing both Russia and China. With the help of the European Union, the US has managed to detach the Ukraine from Russia's strict sphere of influence. The IMF and the World Bank are also important supporters of the US in helping the Central Asian states deal with their economic crises. Moreover, US naval capabilities have disturbed China in the South China Sea.

## The Context and Dynamics of the 'New Great Game'

The 'New Great Game' aims to provide a rhetorical explanation to contradicting and partially conjoining American, Chinese and Russian interests in Central Asia. In a nutshell, the region is important for the US by virtue of its proximity to Afghanistan. For Russia, Moscow aims to sustain its privileged role in the region. For China, Beijing wants to expand its politico-economic influence in Asia.

Within a more detailed framework, the US continues its anti and counter terror activities particularly against Islamic radicals and aims to develop regional cooperation for these activities. Moreover, Washington is after the democratization of the region which could provide a better collaboration with regional countries for marketing natural resources. Russia is against such a democratic transition in the region, and on the contrary protects the regional status-quo via supporting the authoritarian regimes. Yet, similar to Washington, Moscow is also against Islamic ideological movements, not only for a security reasons but also because of their potential to reduce Russian influence in the region. China heavily focuses on utilizing regional energy resources, maintaining the security of energy transfer routes, and keeping the US influence in the region minimum. Beijing is also against Islamist radical movements. This sketch shows that mainly Central Asian security could provide a cooperation platform for these great powers altogether. It also underlines that all three are conflicting on utilizing Central Asian energy resources. Yet, there is more to add to this sketch. The speakers' comments added many details to it. Within a more detailed framework, the US continues its anti- and counter-terror activities, particularly against Islamic radicals. It aims to develop regional cooperation for these activities. Moreover, Washington is after the democratisation of the region, which could provide better collaboration with regional countries in terms for the marketing of natural resources. Russia is against such a democratic transition

in the region; on the contrary, it protects the regional status-quo by supporting the authoritarian regimes. However, similar to Washington, Moscow is also against Islamic ideological movements, not only for security reasons, but also because of their potential to reduce Russian influence in the region. China heavily focuses on utilising regional energy resources, maintaining the security of energy transfer routes, and keeping US influence in the region to a minimum. Beijing is also against Islamist radical movements. This sketch shows that mainly Central Asian security could provide a common cooperation platform for these great powers. It also underlines that all three have conflicts about the utilisation of Central Asian energy resources. However, there is more to add to this sketch: The speakers' comments added many details.

The second speaker focused on the 'New Great Game' from the perspective of the tension between the US, China and Russia in Central Asia, specifically in Afghanistan. He first underlined the difficulty in identifying the current motivations of the states in terms of their geopolitical and security-related interests. The speaker focused on the US military presence in Afghanistan. In the US, the reason for the long-term US military presence is justified as it counters the threat of terrorism. This threat is the element which determines the discussions between the Taliban and the US, with the participation of the Afghan government. Although the US has troops in Germany, Japan and South Korea, the troops stationed in Afghanistan are there for different reasons. When the US established a troop presence in Germany, Japan and South Korea, the US was producing 50 per cent of the global GDP. Today, however, the US produces 25 per cent, which shows that the US relative power has been cut in half.

The Soviet Union also stayed in Afghanistan militarily from 1979 to 1989 due to the same type of threat perception and the need to protect their borders. The So-

viet presence in Afghanistan, close to the Persian Gulf, raised the US threat perception that the Soviets were threatening the oil fields of the Persian Gulf.

The speaker further stated that when the US began to station troops in Afghanistan in 2001, it received the support of Russia and passive support from China. However, the understanding between the US and Russian administrations at that time was that the US troops would stay for a relatively short period and then leave. When US forces continued their stay and achieved a strategic partnership with the government of Afghanistan, Russia's views changed. Iran also helped the US forces in Afghanistan at the beginning of the operation in 2001. Similar to Russia, Iran's perception of the extended stay of US forces in Afghanistan also changed. Also, the US achieved rights for bases in Kirgizstan and Pakistan.

In 2014, the Obama administration, which had a different perspective from that of the Trump administration, decided to withdraw from Afghanistan. The speaker mentioned that when Obama talked with his Russian counterparts about withdrawal, the Russians said, 'We do not believe you.' Therefore, there was a breakdown in cooperation regarding counter-terrorism.

One of the results of current peace negotiations between the US, the Taliban and the Afghan government about the future of Afghanistan has been the development of a fairly significant consensus between the US, China and Russia about the need for a political settlement; this would provide stability after the withdrawal of US troops from the region. President Trump has been able to convince Russia about the US intention to withdraw.

The speaker went on to say that in the mid to long term, the stability of this region depends on the development of connectivity for Afghanistan and Central Asia, as this is a landlocked area. The great powers differ in their viewpoints regarding connectivity. During the US Security Council discussions concerning the mandate for the US mission in Afghanistan, there was a clash between the US and China due to the original text of the draft resolution regarding connectivity via

Belt and Road. The US put forth its strategic objections against the Belt and Road Initiative. As a result, the US bilateral policy toward other countries of the region, particularly in regard to connectivity projects in the region, is not aligned with the interests of Afghanistan and the stability of the country. The question would be whether the US would move from the alignment of a political settlement in Afghanistan toward a more general alignment in terms of connectivity.

The speaker stated that within this context, the US is no longer a major economic power in the region. In 2001, when the US first stationed troops in Afghanistan, its economy was four times larger than the economies of China, Russia and Iran. Today, it is approximately 20 per cent larger. Therefore, should the US retreat from the region or embrace more cooperative efforts?

The third speaker first questioned the existence of the 'New Great Game.' He said that there is a competition among the great powers, but not a game. The interactions between China, Russia and the US are happening on a new type of Eurasian geopolitical space. This space is a testing ground for a new model of world order, where there is no multipolarity, and not even polarity. The US, China and Russia could cooperate, especially in regard to common security. Russia is grateful to the US for having bases in Central Asia due to the common threat perceptions. Russia and China, on the other hand, cooperate for the creation of a Eurasian macro-region. In this macro-region, new types of societies relying on new identities are growing. Also, more multiculturalism is seen in this new region.

The fourth speaker tried to summarise the extremely complex situation of the 'New Great Game' from an American perspective. He stated that President Trump, with his style of communication, has been confusing and puzzling observers. When we look at Central Asia from the American perspective, it is necessary to see how the American elites among the national security elites of Washington feel. The increased perception right now is that the US is surrounded by enemies. By far, the most important bilateral relationship is its relationship with China, and it is no mystery that this

relationship is not good. The Americans believe that the current relationship with China is a relationship of 'failed expectations'. At the beginning of the millennia, after China's succession to the World Trade Organization, the US had a naive idea that China was in the middle of a river: it will cross the river and come to us. The speaker said that 'us' did not mean America in general, but 'us' was the West, indicating a progressive or incremental conversion into a liberal democracy and free market. Now, the Trump administration is saying that it did not happen that way, it is not the way we thought, and China is not one of us. This is the perception which unites the elites of both political parties in Washington, even if these elites do not agree on any other matter. There is a growing perception in Washington that China is an existential threat to the US. The speaker added that this idea should be corrected because he did not believe that it was true.

The speaker mentioned that President Trump has become the catalyst for these perceptions because of the trade war. The trade war really began for the wrong reasons. The tensions surrounding the trade war have also been increasing due to developments in the South China Sea, particularly because China has been establishing its sovereignty there; the Belt and Road Initiative and an increased Chinese presence in Africa have also contributed to this problem. The perception in America is that China is rewriting the rules, such as the Bretton Woods Agreement, which underlined that the US is the world's most formidable economic power. The IMF, the World Bank and the United Nations are the other actors in this rule-based and participatory system, under the benevolent tutelage of the US. It is a way of describing the US as the *good guy*.

The speaker continued that China, having been a very formidable economic power for more than a decade, is now enforcing its position in the world arena by virtue of this international economic system. The perception in the US was that China would join this participatory system. But now, the idea is that this is not happening, and a prolonged confrontational period is expected. This is worrisome because two major economic powers of the world are not agreeing on the

rules of the game. There is now an adversarial relationship between these two major powers.

On the other hand, Russia has aligned itself with China as a legitimate partner. Due to developments in Crimea, and sanctions from the US and the European Union, the logical ally for Russia has become China. The Chinese economy is also much bigger.

The speaker added that this misperception about the intentions of two major powers now affect the opinions of US analysts and policy makers. The reality is that US diplomacy is doing extremely poorly everywhere. In the periphery of Central Asia, the US has 'horrible relations' with Iran and Pakistan, and also significant problems of disengagement with Afghanistan. With India, the US has been trying to improve its relations with some success, but not one hundred per cent. The Philippines, which used to be a US ally, is no more closely attached to the US. The US also has problems with Europe, its traditional ally. Oddly enough, the most shining relationship is with Vietnam, an old enemy. The US does not have many real friends and has not managed to cultivate them successfully.

In this framework, the China-Russia alignment, although is not necessarily anti-American, is creating a new world order. It is different from and probably not compatible with the rule-based system, which was created largely through American agencies after World War II. The current US administration, according to the speaker, is a bit puzzled about its priorities, which is an added element of confusion among Washington political elites. The speaker also mentioned that President Trump could be re-elected, despite the above-mentioned issues of his administration.

The speaker summarised that in order to achieve the connectivity that China has been aiming for, and to create a more organic society in Central Asia, an active American participation is required. In this way, US concerns regarding China and Russia may be resolved, but perhaps they can be reduced through more productive dialogue.

## The Transition of the 'New Great Game' in Central Asia

Because of the moderator's question, the panel's discussions shifted to the transition of Russia-China and US rivalry in Central Asia. In this transition, two elements were highlighted: One is the withdrawal of the US from the region; the other is President Xi's vision for China to become the leader in world politics.

The first speaker began with the concept of globalisation. He stated that globalisation has relied too much on the US. If the US retreats, then everybody retreats. There needs to be a more balanced and inclusive approach. In this sense, Russia is very important because of its role in the region, regardless of its GDP. In other words, the China-Russia relationship is not an alliance, but an interdependence. Globalisation in this sense is Americanisation. Therefore, no one

can replace the US in globalised Central Asia. China's comparative advantage in the region is the building of infrastructure, economic development and mutual connectivity. With these, China has been building an economic corridor which includes Afghanistan and India, and this is becoming the China-South Asia Economic Corridor. Central Asia is the northern part of this corridor and is connected to the countries of the south. In this connectivity, the US also has a significant role. If the US retreats then everybody will suffer. The US is retreating because of its huge debts, and it does not want to cover any more costs. However, to blame China or to scapegoat China will not solve the problem. Therefore, more cooperation is needed in Central Asia.

## Comments and Questions on the 'New Great Game'

The participants examined the 'New Great Game' from various angles. One participant stressed the importance of people's views about globalisation. Globalisation is not only Americanisation, according to one participant. The Chinese are now everywhere, working toward and becoming a part of global society. This is globalisation at the people's level. In addition to that, the Chinese building of infrastructure in Central Asia is creating interconnectivity and therefore furthering globalisation.

Another participant emphasised the situation in Afghanistan. He said that the problems of Afghanistan are related to the geopolitics surrounding the country. Many people have been victimised for this reason; the

suffering of Afghans is a result of this new geopolitical situation. The second speaker commented about the issue of Afghanistan, stating that political solutions require the consideration of victims' testimonies. These testimonies can be seen at the Victims' Museum in Kabul. It is a universal problem that in international politics, victims have little voice. The fourth speaker stated that although he does not have on-the-ground military experience, he has diplomatic experience in Kabul. He has met with top political figures in Afghanistan. According to his experience, at the end of 30 years of war, the US does not seem to have significant achievements in Afghanistan. It is not clear where the billions of US dollars have gone to in Afghanistan, and most of that money still has not been accounted for.



People are paying warlords, and suitcases full of cash have disappeared. The US tried to transform Afghan society toward development and democracy. However, there was an enormous disconnect between the means and the ends. The US did not correctly calculate how to transform Afghan society. The problems are still there, and the Taliban controls 50 per cent of the country. Unfortunately, the outcome is still tragic.

Another participant pointed out that none of the speakers are specifically Central Asian experts or representatives. He particularly commented on the Belt and Road Initiative and the views presented about it. The political and economic elite of Central Asia see the Belt and Road Initiative quite positively, but the people in these countries do not. The reason is that the elites benefit from the initiative, but the common people are suffering from it. For example, the Xinjiang-Uyghur people say that the initiative does not create jobs for them. In other words, the initiative has not met people's expectations. Regarding the Central Asian political elites, the initiative maintains a corrupt system. The development that the initiative is expected to achieve should not be only economic. Moreover, the initiative does not create interdependency, but rather dependency in Central Asia. The Central Asian countries will not and cannot benefit from the outcomes of the initiative; China will be the biggest winner.

Another participant commented on connectivity. Regarding the term, the participant stated that connectivity does not work globally, it works exclusively. It does not touch people's lives. It is mainly bilateral. Another participant commented on connectivity. Regarding the term, the participant stated that connectivity does not work globally; it works exclusively. It does not affect everybody's lives; it is mainly bilateral.

The last participant asked about the Chinese authorities' influence or effect upon Hong Kong. He questioned why both sides are not sincere with each other. The first speaker responded to the question about connectivity and the outcomes of the Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia. He said that within the Belt

and Road Initiative, many contracts were signed in Central Asia. China works with Chinese workers due to the cultural proximity. It is a step-by-step project, and many more contracts are on their way. The initiative does not only target Central Asia, but also connectivity with other regions, including South and North Asia.

Regarding the question of bilateralism, the first speaker underlined that the Belt and Road Initiative is open to everyone. So far, 178 countries have signed agreements within this scheme. Some have not signed because the US is against the plan. Although it currently seems bilateral, it aims to be multilateral. It is a step-by-step process in which China's comparative advantage is in its development of infrastructure. Regarding rule-based relations, no comprehensive rules have been written about e-commerce so far. European and US rules are still in effect. The third speaker commented on the Russian perspective, that Russia-China relations in Central Asia have provided opportunities rather than challenges for Russia.

The fourth speaker commented on the US position regarding China-Russia relations. He stated that a new dialogue is required between the US and China. The role of the US in Central Asia should reply on China-US cooperation and improved understanding. The US media also covers the negative sides of the Belt and Road Initiative, saying that it is not going to be productive and will fail. The speaker underlined that if the Belt and Road works, it will be good for the US. However, more cooperation is needed. The US is an outsider in this region, and therefore it does not have much to bring to the table right now except criticism; this is not productive.

The second speaker briefly stated that the centre of world economy has shifted to continental Asia. Therefore, connectivity is becoming much more important. The US should therefore become more involved in this region.

## Conclusion

The 'New Great Game' in Central Asia still has far too many variables which prevent a clear outline of the future. In an economic sense, although all great power players have had a varying degree of success, individually they are still far behind their ultimate objectives. The US aims to open up the region for international trade and investment with a liberal democratic model, and this goal has not yet been achieved with considerable success. Russia's aims are to achieve a competitive advantage by creating a customs union, but this has not helped to protect its faltering industries. China, despite its vast amounts of capital investment in the region, has not yet developed profitable opportunities.

The secondary sources and speakers' statements do not overlap on some matters, such as the level of tension and concerns among the great power actors. More specifically, the speakers did not touch upon the inconsistencies and imbalances between the Russian and Chinese national interests or priorities. Moreover, Russia's strategies for becoming a formidable actor in Central Asia, as well its manoeuvres to use the US against China were not discussed by the speakers. In short, the 'New Great Game' has its deep complexities which generate rivalry between the great powers. However, at the same time the 'New Great Game' requires cooperation and productive dialogue for a peaceful continuation of this rivalry.

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