

# The Big Game: The Great Powers in Central Asia and the Caucasus

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## Introduction

This essay surveys the contest underway between the major powers in Central Asia and the Caucasus, the geopolitical sphere adjacent to the Middle East that at once influences and is influenced by processes at work in the region. The area includes the former Soviet Union (FSU) states bordering on the “crisis area” south of the Muslim states between Turkey and China, a sphere that is a locus of international tension and a hothouse for radical Islam and international terrorism. The region of Central Asia and the Caucasus has long been a bone of contention between powers; in the nineteenth century the struggle for control of the area was known as “the Big Game.” Today, a similar game, known as “the new big game,” is underway involving the great powers as well as the states in the region. The prize for the winner will be both geopolitical and economic.

The region boasts some of the largest energy reserves in the world; access to them is of strategic significance to all involved – regional as well as external players. In addition, the region is considered to be of major strategic importance because of its geographical location and because it includes countries with Muslim majorities (all the Central Asia states and some of the Caucasus states). As such, the region is a preferred target for both the major powers and neighboring Muslim states interested in expanding their influence. Such a struggle has implications for all involved in it and for the Middle East in general. The purpose of this essay is to examine the processes taking place in this region and their possible ramifications for the Middle East.

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### Characteristics of the Region

Central Asia and the Caucasus form a continuous geopolitical entity with the Middle East, an entity that in addition to its geographical and ethnic diversity also has more than a few economic, religious, cultural, and political common denominators. The region may be divided into two blocs of states: the Caucasus, with three FSU states – Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan; and Central Asia, spanning the area from the Caspian Sea to China, with five Muslim FSU states – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. To the south there is a band of Muslim states – Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan – characterized by ethnic and political tensions, instability, and steady anxiety about the outbreak of radical Islam. This turmoil, whether latent or overt, was prodded by the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the current era, the region has reemerged – like in the past – a preferred geopolitical and economic target for external interests competing among themselves.

The central player claiming special status for itself in the region is Russia, which in the past controlled the area. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was demoted to the role of supporting actor in the region, but about a decade ago, thanks to the strengthening of its economy, Russia adjusted its foreign policy and now views the region as its central contact point with the West, radical Islam, and China. At the same time, other actors have also developed geopolitical, strategic, and economic interests in this region. As a direct result, the region has become the arena for international competition in which Russia, Western states, and China are all major actors that join the important regional actors, Iran and Turkey, in the game.

### Russia

Russia, greatly weakened by the collapse of the Soviet Union, has surprised the world in recent years by increasing its activities in the international arena. In order to promote its national objectives, Russia pursues a strategy of multipolarity designed to make it as influential an international player as the United States and enable it to influence global processes through international institutions and the nurturing of common interests with other international players. Russia, bordering the entire length of the region, has a long history of close relations with the regional players. It attributes a great deal of strategic weight to the region.



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In the field of national security, it views the region as a buffer or security zone with regard to NATO and radical states such as Afghanistan and Pakistan. On the geopolitical level, Russia defines it as a preferred sphere of opportunities for building influence and promoting its objectives both in regional and global systems.

#### *Intra-Russian Considerations*

Within the Russian territory adjacent to the region there is a large Muslim population: in Russia's Southern Federal District (SFD) there are seven Muslim provinces and there are two more in the Volga Federal District (VFD).<sup>1</sup> The provinces within the VFD are still peaceful. By contrast, the militant Muslim front, which originated in Chechnya, is active in the northern Caucasus and is challenging Russia's southern border and promoting radical Islam. For close to two decades, a stubborn, bloody war has been raging in the northern Caucasus between Russian and Muslim rebels, including two full scale wars with Chechnya, which despite its defeat still harbors resistance movements. This fighting involves Muslim forces and supporters from the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> In addition, there is terrorist activity in other Muslim districts in the northern Caucasus, taking the

form of guerilla warfare and terrorism in the entire region. Even worse, with the defeat of the Chechnyan jihadists, these trends have spread to other Russian districts.<sup>3</sup>

A further challenge to Russia is its deteriorating demographic situation: the Slavic population is shrinking while the Muslim sector is growing. Today Russia numbers some 15 million Muslims; this number is expected to spiral upward. Unless radical Islam's spread is halted, it is liable in the future to encompass most of the Muslim population. This complex reality dictates to Russia the need to act to secure its borders with the Muslim world as well as to contain the Islamic threat from within. The Central Asian and the Caucasus states should, according to Russia's understanding, serve as a buffer to curb the threat as well as to be a bridgehead for promoting Russia's influence in this region.

#### *Foreign Policy Considerations*

Russia's assertive activities in the region are designed primarily to promote its status as an agent of influence and attain clear geopolitical and economic objectives. Russia sees its territory bordering on Central Asia and the Caucasus as its soft underbelly adjacent to a major area of conflict in today's world. It not only affords Russia an opportunity to curb the Islamic threat but also presents it with other opportunities, both economic (in the form of energy resources) and political (by allowing

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Russia to attain international prestige through stopping the West from establishing a firm foothold there, which would threaten Russia's own interests in the region). Russia's path to promote its influence in the region is first and foremost through edging out the United States and other unwanted elements by encouraging anti-Western trends; giving aid, including security and defense assistance, to target states;<sup>4</sup> and developing active political engagement, in part via mediation and arbitration services.

In addition to bilateral relations with the particular states, Russia's activities in the region also include initiating new international forums such as the Collective Security Treaty Association (CSTO<sup>5</sup>) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

(SCO<sup>6</sup>). Both were instituted at Russia's initiative with the intention inter alia of fighting terrorism. Russia is a central player in the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO<sup>7</sup>), and has observer status in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which cooperates with Russia in its struggle against the Chechens.<sup>8</sup> Lately, the organization recommended that Russia be more intensively involved in the political process in the Middle East on the basis of the Saudi initiative.

Although the United States generally treats Russia as a supporting actor, Russia represents a competitor and challenge to the United States and NATO in its drive to be an agent of influence in the region. Therefore it prefers cooperation with Iran and China against the West. When necessary, it does not flinch from using violence, such as embarking on war against Georgia, in order to prevent it and other likely candidates from crossing lines and joining NATO.

#### *The Economic Dimension*

Russia's economic interests in the region, home to some of the world's largest oil and gas reserves, are also of great importance. In Russia's understanding, the West in general and the United States in particular are hard at work to decrease Russian and Iranian influence in the field of oil export and transport. Russia's concern on this matter has increased recently because of the progress made on the TBC project – the pipeline from the Caspian to the Mediterranean – belonging primarily to British, Azeri, American, and Turkish companies. In tandem with this project, a gas pipeline, also from Azerbaijan to the Mediterranean via Turkey, has been laid; this too is under American-British majority control.<sup>9</sup> This pipeline is slated to be joined to the most important European project – the Turkey-Austria gas pipeline (also known as Nabucco) – being laid from Turkey's border with Iran and Georgia to Europe. At the other end, the underwater pipe will be laid in the Caspian Sea and reach Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, both gas exporters in their own right, while bypassing Russia and Iran. Meanwhile, Russia is promoting the South Stream project to transport gas from Russia to Europe through the Black Sea bypassing Ukraine, and the East Siberia-Pacific Ocean project – a line to transport oil to China.

Nonetheless, the purely economic component is not the deciding factor in Russia's foreign policy considerations. The energy lines from

the Caspian Sea are not there solely for financial gain but also serve as a security zone and as demarcation lines of spheres of control and influence. Russia is increasing its diplomatic activity in the Caspian Sea region and is challenging the West, China, and Iran all at once.<sup>10</sup>

In sum, Russia's activities in the region are rife with both risks and opportunities. Russia's dilemma lies in making the wisest choice of the alternatives available. On the table are issues such as its dealings with the Iranian question, with emphasis on the latter's nuclear program; the threat of radical Islam; China's plans for the future; energy pipelines; and striving for regional hegemony while keeping the competition at bay. Russia will likely continue to pose a major challenge to the United States and will not make it easy for future American involvement in the region, unless it obtains fitting compensation favoring its own interests, such as offering it participation in the political process in the Middle East or in other fields. In this sense, and because of the limitations of the other players, Russia has a reasonable chance of gaining the status of regional leader.

### The West

With varying degrees of success, the United States is promoting deeper involvement in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The United States is acting together with NATO in order to lure the Caucasus and Central Asia away from Russian influence through Western investments, joint projects on a host of issues, and even security assistance.<sup>11</sup> The primary objective of this trend is to gain influence in a sphere of great strategic importance that commands some of the most important energy reserves in the world today. After years of Western successes in attempts to gain a foothold in the Caucasus, including working to bring Georgia and other states under NATO's umbrella, these efforts have hit a snag.

Russia, steadfast in its concept of Russian hegemony in the FSU region, has increasingly felt its interests threatened, and in August 2008, taking advantage of a local crisis, went to war against Georgia. This may actually be viewed as a war between Russia and the West for hegemony in the Caucasus. Clearly with the Russian victory, the West's plan has been postponed, and it appears that the issue will be resolved in future understandings between the United States and Russia. For now, Russia's

violent response in Georgia, while harming its relations with the West, caused NATO to freeze its intention to expand eastwards.

In addition to their direct involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States and NATO have established a chain of support bases for their activities in the region, from the Balkans through the shores of the Black and Caspian Seas and across Central Asia. These bases are highly unpopular with Russia and China. Russia is actively working to prevent their establishment or force their closure (as happened in Uzbekistan), but the United States and NATO have not given up on their efforts in this field. This activity by NATO in the region – establishing its presence there while inviting the region's states to join its ranks – is one of the biggest hurdles to the Russians and they have begun to respond with violence. For its part, the United States has attempted to mitigate Russia's efforts to undermine NATO by exerting various forms of pressure on other fronts. Russia believes that steps such as the eastward expansion of NATO, placing missiles in Europe, and even the color revolutions in FSU states all bear the mark of America's involvement.

Last year the United States adopted a new approach, anchored in the "Reset" program, which involves positive incentives for Russia in most of its areas of interest, including ceding the stationing of interceptive missiles in Europe, recognizing Russia's special status in the FSU region, and allowing it opportunities for involvement in international systems in general and in the Middle East in particular.

As a result, the dynamics between Russia and the United States are evolving to include enlistment of support from Russia and China (which is cooperating with Russia on these matters) for the fight against terrorism, and especially assistance in containing Iran's nuclear program. Russia, which has consistently worked to undermine American efforts, is now ready to cooperate on this latter issue. Russia is leaning towards cooperating to convince Iran to concede the nuclear issue, but there are still doubts about Russia's actual willingness to impose further sanctions on Iran.

The Chinese believe that containing the Iranian challenge and calming the situation in Iran and Afghanistan will transfer the pressure from the West to China's doorstep.

## Iran

Iran is Russia's primary strategic partner in Central Asia and the Caucasus because of its geographical location, which makes it the sphere's central



axis; its friendly foreign policy towards Russia, which avoids challenging Iran among the FSU states; its avoidance of support for radical Islam on Russian territory; and its alliance with Russia in the region about policies concerning the transport of energy from the Caspian Sea. All of these make Tehran a desirable ally for Russia. Together with China, Russia continues to block the imposition of harsh sanctions against Iran.

Iran too views this cooperation as important leverage against the West. In return for varied support and assistance from Russia, Iran has usually avoided subversive activity, normally part of its export of the Islamic revolution, in the regions that constitute Russia's sphere of interests. At the same time, Russia has plenty of reasons to view Iran with suspicion. Although it does not feel directly threatened by Iran's nuclear ambitions, it is clear to Russia that when Iran does complete its nuclear program Russia will be facing challenges to its own ambitions of regional hegemony. Recently, Russian cooperation with the West over the containment of Iran's nuclear program and cooperation with NATO forces in fighting terrorism (such as in Afghanistan) has grown. Yet despite the harsh exchanges between Russia and Iran because of Moscow's cooperation with the West, it appears that Russia has no intention of giving up its special status with regard to Iran.

### Turkey

Turkey is especially important among the regional states, and has both far reaching interests and increasing influence over regional issues. For a long time, Turkey, a NATO member, acted as a Western ally with regard to the region's challenges, but lately it has experienced internal processes that are generating a change in its positions (political rather than economic)<sup>12</sup> with the potential of leading to conflicting interests with the West.

Motivating Turkey is the fact that in the past it controlled parts of the region, as well as the fact that most of the FSU Muslim population speaks various dialects of Turkish. These issues have fed pan-Turkish notions that are still popular with parts of the Turkish population. Such trends clash with Iran's ambitions to extend its own influence over these regions, some of which were under Iranian governance in the past. Today Turkey is seeing the strengthening of the Islamic trend, and this has increased its interest in involvement in the region, at once a challenge



to the West and competition with other Islamic elements in the race to regional hegemony. Turkey is not just another Western element, and finds itself at a crossroads regarding its own development – whether to go the route of Islamization or the route of the West. Whichever it opts for, its choice is bound to affect the geopolitical game in Central Asia and the Middle East in general.

### China

China, growing stronger at a rapid – for some, even worrisome – rate, represents a future threat towards Russia, though at present China's leading interest lies in stopping the West from establishing itself in the regions of influence critical to China. In this constellation, China is cooperating with Russia, especially in everything having to do with undermining the advance of American forces towards its borders.

China's main problem is finding a solution to its energy needs, preferably with minimum dependence on both the United States and Russia. China's interest in good relations with Tehran is a function of Iran being both an energy provider and an anti-Western partner. Energy pipelines are of no less importance to the Chinese, preferably if they traverse Central Asia in order to avoid the regions where the United States has already established its presence.

The Central Asian states have taken advantage of the situation to foster economic relations with China, thus strengthening their own independent status vis-à-vis Russia and the West. Recently, a 1,833 km gas pipeline from Central Asia to China, the result of a Russian-Turkmeni dispute, was inaugurated. In order to prevent losses due to Russia's conduct, Turkmenistan decided to lay down an alternate route. The pipeline crosses Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan on its way to China, bypassing Russia for the first time in history. Russia is apparently concerned about losing its status as the region's dominant economic actor and is working to contain the economic damages created by subverting cooperation between Central Asian nations and the Caucasus with the United States. This policy is of course supported by the Chinese.

Among the sensitive topics affecting China's policy in its relations with the regional states are the Chinese areas bordering Central Asia inhabited primarily by Muslim ethnic groups that live in the regional states. From the Chinese perspective, the infiltration of national and

Islamic influences to its territory is a threat to China's crucial interests and is reflected in China's formulation of its policy towards the region in general and towards loci of radical Islam in particular.

This network of strategic considerations is pushing China from the level of limited local activity towards involvement in this geopolitical sphere, including the establishment of a future axis with Iran and Central Asian states. The significance of these plans, should they in fact be consolidated, is the increased involvement of China in matters concerning Central Asia and the Middle East. The Chinese believe that containing the Iranian challenge and calming the situation in Iran and Afghanistan will transfer the pressure from the West to China's doorstep. Also, the question of the future of Russian-Chinese relations remains open. Therefore, the preferred situation from China's point of view is continuing the current confrontation between the West and radical Islam, which allows it to develop economic and political ties with the regional states.

### Conclusion

In the ensuing reality following the geopolitical shocks in widespread areas in Asia, there is a broad axis of instability, which is a strong threat to the international community. This axis includes a chain of confrontations threatening to spill over to Central Asia and the Caucasus. An additional concern is that this threat will spread via international terrorism and the export of the Islamic revolution to other regions. In light of this trend, in tandem with their respective interests, a competition among the great powers (including the United States and NATO, Russia, and China) for hegemony in Central Asia and the Caucasus has emerged. Russia attributes strategic significance to the area and is devoting great international effort to it in contrast with the Western interest, thus creating competition. The Russians, along with the Chinese, Iranians, and other self-interested supporters are working to deny the United States a firm foothold in the region. To date Russia's status in Central Asia and the Caucasus, alongside its position on the Iranian question, justifies US proposals for cooperation with Russia in exchange for far-reaching concessions, and it would seem that these are receiving a positive response.

The complex of Russian interests in the region may be summarized as follows:

1. The dominant consideration is Russia's national security, which requires keeping control over the region, Russia's soft underbelly exposed to Islamic, Chinese, and other future pressures. Russia's preferred solution is creating a buffer zone vis-à-vis the West and Islam and securing the position of regional hegemon in the FSU republics.
2. The second consideration is the global confrontation with the West intended to improve Russia's international standing, which dictates political involvement in the region.
3. The last consideration is economic, in the sense of controlling the energy pipelines, especially as a lever for strategic influence.

Underlying all these considerations are geopolitics that encompass all the issues, translated into a policy of attaining regional hegemony. This includes the creation of a safety buffer and the construction of a bridgehead for regional influence and managing processes desirable to the Russians. The central development on the table concerns Iran, whose future will affect the entire system in Central Asia and the Middle East. Indeed, regarding the overall region Iran is viewed by the Russians and the Chinese as a central axis, and cooperation with it is deemed of great importance.

Processes in the Middle East are also affected by events in Central Asia. It is possible that Russia will finally consolidate its influential status in the Middle East through the points it is likely to gain in Central Asia, first and foremost with regard to Iran. One possible result is a future attempt at greater Russian involvement in political activity in the Middle East, both with regard to ongoing matters and – especially – with regard to the political process. This has the potential to affect the current rules of the game.

### Notes

- 1 Kabardino-Balkaria, Chechnya, Karachai-Cherkessia, Dagestan, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Adigia-Alania, and in the VFD – Tatarstan and Bashkortostan.
- 2 Doku Umarov, who succeeded President A. Sadulayev in 2007, declared, "now our enemy is not only Russia but also America, England, Israel – all those who wage war against Islam and Muslims."
- 3 For example, Ingushetia is home to influential organizations such as the

Caliphate and Ingush Jamaat, while Dagestan has Jennet and Shariat, Bashkorostan – Hizb-ut-Tahrir, and Karbardina-Balkaria – Yarmuk; Igor Dobaev, "The North Caucasus: The Process of 'Jihad Spreading,'" *Russia and the Muslim World* 9 (207) (2009): 62-75.

- 4 In addition, Russia is promoting the establishment of the CSTO Army (KCOP), joint special forces of the CSTO nations.
- 5 Founded in 1992, its member nations are Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.
- 6 Founded in 2001; China is a member while Iran and Pakistan have observer status.
- 7 This is an economic organization uniting Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan; Turkey has observer status.
- 8 For example, in 1994 Chechnya was refused entrance into the OIC. The organization's involvement in the Russia-Chechnya crisis has always been guarded and has tended to offer assistance to Russia.
- 9 British, American, Italian, French, and Norwegian companies hold 63 percent of TBC stock and 69 percent of BTE (Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum Pipeline) stock.
- 10 "Options for Tougher Sanctions against Iran," Reuters News Agency, December 5, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE58S2HY20090929>.
- 11 For example, the United States is the largest source of investments (FDI) after Holland in the economy of Kazakhstan. In the field of security, from 2001 until 2009, the United States had military bases in Kyrgyzstan (Manas) and Uzbekistan (Hanabab), which was closed in 2005, though cooperation with the Americans continued. In August 2009 Tashkent stopped the establishment of a Russian military base in nearby Kyrgyz, and at the same time signed a defense cooperation treaty with the United States. Russia's efforts to confront the United States in Tajikistan are described in Maksim Starchak, "The U.S. vs. Russia in Military-Political Cooperation with Tajikistan," [http://www.ca-c.org/online/2009/journal\\_eng/cac-03/02.shtml](http://www.ca-c.org/online/2009/journal_eng/cac-03/02.shtml).
- 12 On the economic level, Turkey has clear interests in the region. All major routes for the transport of gas and oil from Central Asian nations to Europe, including the Nabucco pipeline, go through Turkey. Turkey and Iran head the Organization for Economic Cooperation uniting the ten Central Asian states, including Pakistan and Afghanistan.