

# Central Asia and the Great Games: Different Times, the Same Game?

## Abstract

*This paper analyzes the concepts of Great Game and New Great Game that, although separated in time, capture our attention in a region of extreme importance in the international system: Central Asia. We will begin by addressing the origins of the Great Game, which in the past opposed the Russian empire to the British empire in the dispute for control of Central Asia.*

*The notion of New Great Game will be subsequently discussed.*

*What special attributes does the region have for Chinese, Russians and Americans to be so actively implicated there? This and other questions will be addressed in this paper.*

*Examining the objectives, actors, locations and methods used by both games, this paper argues that the concept of New Great Game may prove inadequate to the essence of the reality it wants to describe.*

## Key Words

Central Asia; Great Game; New Great Game; Russian Empire; British Empire

## Introduction

In this article we will examine the concepts of the Great Game and the New Great Game that although separated in time, focus our attention on a region of extreme importance in the international system: Central Asia.

Why this theme? In a context where various commentators of geopolitics tend to frequently resort to the term New Great Game, within the framework of the events that currently take place in Central Asia (specifically, the battle for control of energy sources, by major economic players, states and multinational companies, among others), it is pertinent to reflect on the meaning of the concept. In other words, to what does the New Great Game refer, after all? But more than that, it is important to ask to what extent the expression *New Great Game* is correctly used to describe the geopolitical context and atmosphere of competition for access to the black gold in Central Asia, a region that Brzezinski once called 'the Axis of the World'? On the other hand, is it in fact possible to establish an analogy between today's New Great Game and the former Great Game of the nineteenth century, which opposed the British and the Russian empires for supremacy in Central Asia? Are these concepts really comparable, taking into account the economic, political, cultural and military context of the nineteenth century and today's reality in Central Asia? And what can be said about the notion of *Great Game*? Is it, perhaps, a myth that has been directly or indirectly nourished by novelists and commentators of geopolitics? These and other questions will be object of our utmost attention in this article, which will seek, in the light of historical events, to help deconstruct and demystify certain stereotypes that may, unduly, contribute to overshadow the actual events that occurred in the past and currently take place in Central Asia. After all, it is important to consider that the authors who often repeat a stereotype are, therefore, contributing to it becoming, directly or indirectly, a commonly accepted fact, without undergoing the scrutiny of historical objectivity. In light of the old maxim (which still remains today) - there are no arguments against facts - this paper attempts to reconstruct History, rather than help perpetuate the myth and /or the false perception of reality.

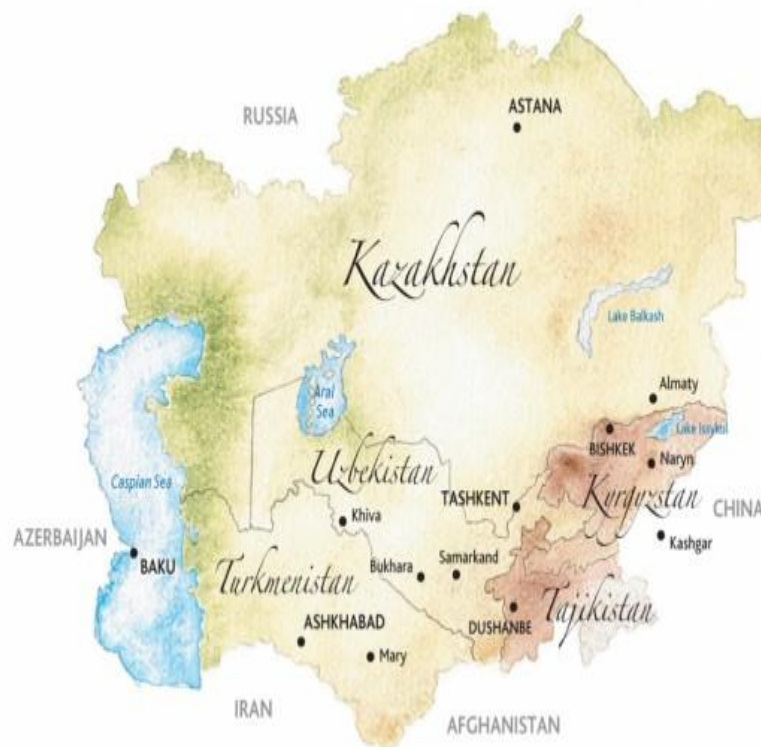
That said, in order to achieve the various aforementioned goals, this discussion will be structured into three major moments. Initially, the face to face with History will enable us to trace the origins of the concept of the Great Game.

In a second phase, still continuing to resort to the historical facts, it is time to describe the main features of the New Great Game. We will seek, for example, to highlight the special attributes of Central Asia - which explain why Chinese, Americans and Russians are so actively engaged there. Finally, in a third phase, after characterizing the two Great Games, it is time to compare them, highlighting their main similarities and differences. Is the *New Great Game* a 'valid' concept? Intercrossing the various pieces of the puzzle of modern geopolitics of Central Asia with the events of the past, it is possible to anticipate the conclusion that the New Great Game seems to be inadequate to the essence of the reality it aims to describe, since it refers to events almost radically different from those that occurred in the original Great Game.

Analyzing the goals, players, locations and methods used by these two games, this article argues that stronger than the ties that bind them seems to be what separates the Old from the New Great Game.

### The face to face with history: the origins of the concept

For centuries, Central Asia has been the object of rivalries and machinations by the Great Powers. During the nineteenth century, Britain feared that another European power might take advantage of Islamic Asia's political decay. It began with France. Then it was Russia's turn to advance along the caravan routes of the ancient conquerors, threatening to establish a new world monarchy. England, in turn, expressed its concern regarding the consequences of the continuous march of the Russian Empire towards South Asia. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, "it was relatively consensual, in Europe, that the next major war - the inevitable war - would be the final confrontation between Britain and Russia" (Fromkin, 1980: 936).



**Fig.1. Map of Central Asia**

<http://www.farfrontiers.com/image/305/600/>

Nineteenth-century Tsarist Russia was viewed with some ambivalence by the British. Its cultural distance, as well as its technological backwardness, were regarded as incompatible with the progress of Victorian England. On the

other hand, the enormous scale of the Russian Empire and its expansionist ambitions were of concern to the British, who kept a close eye on their rival's moves. In fact, Britain feared that the 'jewel in the crown', which was then India, would fall into Russian hands. Such fears increased as the Russians seemed to take possession of an increasing number of khanates. The British believed that Afghanistan would be the next step in Russia's strategy, before it took India over definitively. Due to this concern, Britain declared the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-1842), one of the first and most important conflicts of the Great Game and, simultaneously, a misfortune for the British, who failed to establish a regime in Afghanistan favorable to their political interests. After a humiliating retreat from Kabul, the British ambitions towards Afghanistan cooled. However, the country, in the eyes of the British, continued to be a key element in the strategy of containment of Russian expansionism.

### **The concept of *Great Game***

#### **What was, after all, the *Great Game*?**

The interaction, conflict and divergence of regional and global interests, culminated in the modern era, in what Arthur Conolly has called "*Great Game of quest for power and influence in the region*" (Lansford, 2002: 128). In essence, the *Great Game* has to do with the colonial and strategic rivalry between the Russian and British Empires for supremacy in Central Asia, in the nineteenth century, which led, among others, to the creation of Afghanistan as a buffer state. The Russo-Persian Treaty of 1813 and the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 are the two historical landmarks that delimit the Great Game in time, in spite of having been characterized by less intense conflict after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 (Kelly, 2000).

Although Arthur Conolly (an officer from the British East India Company) is considered the father of the Great Game, it was the writer Rudyard K, through his novel *Kim* (1901), who introduced this concept to the masses. The Great Game was a dispute, conducted by two imperial powers, for political dominance, control and security of the territories located between the Russian and British Empires. For Russia, controlling Afghanistan and the neighboring regions represented an important step in ensuring access to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. As a result, the Russians conquered the territories that later would give birth to Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. From the British point of view, the control of the area was essential to ensure the protection of all Indian colonies.

The Great Game was contemporary with British industrialization, which explains, among other aspects, the equipping of Her Majesty's fleet with more sophisticated means. However, this modernization could not guarantee that in case of a Russian attack on British assets in India, the British would be able to react quickly and with reasonable firepower. These practical and military considerations ultimately boosted the dispatch of exploration missions to India, as well as the development of the region's cartography. On the other hand, they

are responsible for the establishment of unstable alliances with local warlords, in order to facilitate British penetration in an area where the Russian enemy was moving dangerously. Despite the conflict and rivalry that characterized the Great Game, it should be noted that Russia and England never declared open war on each other. In fact, the Great Game took place 'silently' and secretly in faraway places, in the heart of Central Asia - an area hitherto unknown to both rivals. On the other hand, the 'feared' invasion, expected by both parts, never came to pass. It is worth quoting David Fromkin, for whom "the nature of the dispute has been described in many different ways" (Fromkin, 1980: 941). If the "Great Game resulted from complex disagreements between England and Russia", the author states that "the weight to be attributed to each of the causes of the Russian-British rivalry is still the subject of contention among historians" (Fromkin, 1980: 941).

The Great Game involved three main phases (Hopkirk, 2002). The first began with the expansion of the Russian Empire in the Caucasus and Central Asia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, generating alarm signals in the East India Company, the *de facto* power in India. Fearing Russia's intentions, the Company sent officers to explore the way, by land, to the northern border of India. During the nineteenth century, the British government sought to engage more intensely in Central Asian issues, transforming the *Great Game*, until then, private in nature, into an essential element of the defense of the empire, as well as of foreign and colonial policy. The methods that were used encompassed resorting to secret agents, occasionally combined with overt military action. This first phase of the Great Game ended in 1907 with the signing of the Anglo-Russian Convention.

In turn, the second phase of the Great Game lasted about ten years - from 1907 to 1917. The methods used were essentially the same as in the previous phase: resorting to secret agents who sought to manipulate local populations and tribes.

Finally, the third phase of the Great Game took place after the Russian Revolution of 1917, when the Bolsheviks, under Lenin's command, set out to "liberate, by means of armed revolt, the whole of Asia from imperialist domination" (Hopkirk, 2002: 61). This third phase culminated in the consolidation of Bolshevik power over the former tsarist domains. Regardless of the individual goals or fate of the various actors, the main objective - security and power of the two empires - remained unchanged.

### **Between myth and reality**

Apart from divergences between British and Russians, which led to incidents of war, historiography tends to mitigate the drama that, in a sense, formed around the Great Game. Gerald Morgan, for instance, while analyzing the past events that occurred in Central Asia, concluded that there is no effective evidence of the existence of a British intelligence network in the region. This author believes that the steps England took to gather information on the

movements of the Russian rival were sporadic. At worst, as argued by G. Morgan, the skirmishes and intrigues that occurred among both Empires are mere unsubstantiated rumors that, in fact, "have always been common in Central Asia, regarding both Russia and Great Britain" (Morgan, 1973: 64).

Malcolm Yapp is yet another author that does not hesitate to contribute to the demystification of the 'aura' created around the Great Game. The title of his book is, in fact, elucidative: *The legend of the Great Game*. The work of M. Yapp plays an important contribution to the analysis of the Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia, as it has added more pieces to the knowledge puzzle of the Great Game. According to this author, the British had used the term *The Great Game*, at the end of the 1800s, to clarify certain aspects that, although related to the British interests in the Asia of the nineteenth century, have nothing to do with how the Great Game has been understood. In fact, the author believes that the major concern of the British authorities in India focused mainly on the control of the local population, rather than in seeking to prevent the invasion of the Russian Empire (Morgan, 2001). Malcolm Yapp does not deny that nineteenth century Russia had expansionist ambitions. However, the author places specific emphasis on the priority that represented, in the eyes of Victorian England, the internal control of India, as opposed to the external threats that could eventually undermine British interests at the regional level. In this regard, M. Yapp stated that if one analyzes the history of the British Empire in India and in the Middle East, one would certainly be impressed with both their prominence and the unrealism of their strategic discussions.

## **The concept of *New Great Game***

### **The origins of the concept**

After the old version of the Great Game entered the annals of history, another one emerged: The New Great Game. With the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, the balance of power in the world has changed in favor of the United States, which replaced Great Britain as a world power. Since that time, Washington would seek to not only contain the Soviet enemy, but to also assert its influence in the Middle East, coveting the 'black gold', as well as other resources indispensable for the growth and consolidation of a great power. This period is often called by commentators on geopolitics as the New Great Game (Edwards, 2003). It is a term used to "describe the modern geopolitics in Central Asia, which is characterized by a competition between the United States, Britain and other NATO member states against Russia, China and other states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, for influence, power and hegemony in Central Asia and Transcaucasus" (Edwards, 2003: 85). It is a reference to the Great Game which, as already mentioned, was a political rivalry between the Russian and the British Empires, in the nineteenth century. However, in the New Great Game, the competition does not focus on the effective control of a geographical area (in this case, Central Asia). The rivalry focuses, rather, in what many analysts call the 'regional policy of oil'. In this

regard, Karl Meyer and Shareen Brysac state that "the pipelines, tanker routes, oil consortiums, and the signed contracts are the rewards of the New Great Game" (Brysac, 1999: 23).

According to Nelson Olic, the "Great Game of today" is linked to the fact that "in the last fifteen years, the discovery of new promising reserves of hydrocarbons (oil and natural gas)" have been sparking "the interests of countries and large multinationals not only in terms of their exploitation, but also in terms of their flow to the open seas" (Olic, 2004: 2). Such a game was relaunched from 1992-1993 by the Americans, who took advantage of the fall of the Soviet Union and the weakness of Yeltsin's Russia, with the ultimate goal of preventing the rebirth of their great rival. In practice, Washington expected to increase its presence in the states that once formed part of the Soviet Union, as in the former Eastern Europe and in the Balkans. This objective was facilitated as the United States (but also Iran, Turkey, India, Pakistan, China and then Russia) took advantage of the power vacuum that resulted from the collapse of the Soviet Union to push into the region.

### **The geopolitical and geostrategic importance of Central Asia in the context of the New Great Game**

For centuries, Central Asia has been the crossroads of Eurasia. Indeed, it is the point of confluence of four civilizations that have, concurrently, controlled and been controlled by the Central Asian peoples. On the other hand, according to Xiaojie Xu (1999: 33), "the civilizations that dominate the region have been able to exert their influence in other parts of the world".

Central Asia is bounded by the Caspian Sea, Siberia, Mongolia, Tibet and the Hindu Kush. It is an inner region, surrounded by a huge land mass that covers a vast territory of steppes, deserts and mountains, occupying an area larger than Western Europe and about half of the United States (Kandiyoti, 2008).



**Fig. 2. Map of Central Asia**

[http://www.centralasiatravel.com/images/central\\_asia\\_big.jpg](http://www.centralasiatravel.com/images/central_asia_big.jpg)

The economic structure of Central Asia, as well as its political features, is strongly marked by its geographical location, specifically by the difficult access to other parts of the world. On the other hand, as Xiaojie Xu notes (1999: 36), "the survival of Central Asian states depends mainly on the maintenance of several corridors and vital connection links".

With regard to international geopolitics, Central Asia is one of the most important regions of the world, given its impact on the politics and economics of the great powers. As Zhao Huasheng (2009: 475) mentions, it "forms a buffer zone between great powers, although Russia keeps special relations with the countries of the region". In the opinion of many analysts, Central Asia "remains a key player in the 'chess game' of world power" (Edwards, 2003: 96). One of the most famous examples in this regard is due to Zbigniew Brzezinski, who suggested a post-modern version of the Mackinder/Haushofer geopolitical doctrine. Referring to Central Asia - "the Eurasian Balkans" - as "geopolitically significant for energy reasons, socio-political instability and potential domain of power, Brzezinski states that the main U.S. interest should be to ensure that no power gains control over this geopolitical space" (Edwards, 2003: 96). Indeed, the fact that Eurasia occupies a central position on the planet leads the author to argue that "whoever controls this space, will dominate the world," linking, on the other hand, the durability of U.S. hegemony to the policy of Washington in the region (Iseri, 2009:36).

One of the characteristics of Central Asia consists of it being a place of competition and rivalry between great powers, influencing in this way the international structure that emerged after the Cold War. Geopolitics provides, of course, one explanation for this fact, as it is "largely determined by the dimensions of a region" (Huasheng, 2009: 475). Indeed, "the major powers need to acquire a large land mass to exert influence in the international scene" (Huasheng, 2009: 475). Several authors do not hesitate, therefore, in attributing to Central Asia a "prominent position in the context of a new world order" (Xu, 1999: 33).



## **The diplomacy of 'black gold'**

### *Interests at stake*

The geographic isolation of many new states of Central Asia (including Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan), which means that they do not have access to seaports to export their products, led these countries to think of alternatives capable of dealing with such geographical constraints. For oil and natural gas to reach their target markets, it is necessary that they pass through the territory of, at least, one transit country. Thus, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, several pipeline projects have been negotiated and some have been implemented (Bahgat, 2006).

This 'black gold' diplomacy has several features. First, analyzing the historical context, we find that, for several decades, these Central Asian states were integrated in the former Soviet Union. It is, therefore, no surprise that just before these countries became independent, all the pipelines of the Caspian Sea were under the control of Moscow, or that Russia continued to dominate them in the period that followed. The reason for this is that building a pipeline, not to say a network of pipelines, requires complex arrangements and commitments, not only from a financial point of view, but also political (Crisan, 2008). On the other hand, despite some occasional disagreements, Russia still enjoys a special relationship, at the cultural, economic and political level, with these former Soviet republics (Torbakov, 2007).

However, the trend points to the possible emergence of a network of pipelines, as the Russian system is no longer appropriate for meeting the growing production of oil and natural gas in the region. To this fact, we should also add the desire of the countries bordering the Caspian Sea in reaching political and economic independence from the Russian giant. That said, one understands that the diversification of the pipeline network has been converted into a key strategy to help reduce Moscow influence and, at the same time, to ensure the independence of these states. Thirdly, the decision to build a pipeline system is not only based on the cost analysis of a project. Geopolitical interests play a key role in the choice of the routes of the pipelines. An argument that weighs in the decision to build these infrastructures is to weaken Russian influence in the region, as well as to deprive Tehran of any political or financial benefit (Bahgat, 2006). In fact, although Iran represents a perfectly viable option regarding oil exports from the Caspian Sea to the Asian markets, the strained relations between Tehran and the international community largely reduce the interest in this possibility.

In the 'black gold' diplomacy there are, in essence, constraints, interests at stake, preferred oil routes and others to avoid. All these aspects form part of the logic of the New Great Game, which is not restricted to competition for oil and natural gas: indeed, the pursuit of economic influence is almost always linked to the desire for political influence.

## **The ambitions and strategies of the great powers in the regional context**

The energy wealth of Central Asia has transformed the region into a crossroads of rivalry between states, competition between companies and regional (state and non-state) actors. The major economic powers and multinationals are keen to participate in this race for energy (Shuja, 2006). Access to oil reserves, as well as the route that pipelines should take, the debate about who should be responsible for their construction and maintenance, as well as the composition of consortia and companies in charge of it, are linked to the premises of the New Great Game. The dispute of influence regarding oil consortia - namely the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) and the Azerbaijan International Operating Company (AIOC) – is, in itself, an integral component of the New Great Game.

As Jaffe et al. (2000: 68) refer, "a secure supply of oil, gas and other energy sources has become a major concern in the post-Gulf War". According to the authors (Jaffe et al., 2000: 68), "ex-combatants were simply fascinated by the idea that the former Soviet empire could easily be robbed of its vast oil wealth".

The rivalries inherent in the Caspian energy resources are of an increasing complexity if we consider the divergence of interests expressed by the great powers. Indeed, the United States, Russia and China seek to influence the domestic policies of the Central Asian states, in order to favour their own strategic objectives.

### *The objectives of the United States*

Starting with the United States, it is undeniable that its oil reserves have dropped significantly since 1990. This explains that the difference between consumption and energy production in the U.S. has been gradually replaced by the use of imported oil. Whereas the Clinton Administration stressed the "importance of an active policy in Central Asia", the energy plan of the Bush Administration pointed, in turn, to the need to spend "a lot more effort to ensure an additional external supply of energy", explicitly referring to the Caspian Sea basin (Klare, 2002: 100).

In this context, Central Asia is, obviously, important to Washington. On the other hand, we should not forget that the struggle against terrorism that followed the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, brought more strategic value to the region, both in the support of military operations against the Taliban in Afghanistan, and in the fight against Islamic rebel movements. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the U.S. have been, since then, interested in strengthening the independence of the former Soviet republics, promoting democracy and the market economy, while seeking to contain the Russian and Chinese influence in the region (Macfarlane, 2004). Due to these economic and strategic interests, it is not surprising that Washington has established a close relationship with

Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, despite the low levels of compliance to human rights and the lack of transparency in these countries (Iseri, 2009). However, such proximity does not prevent the leaders of the Central Asian republics from being suspicious of U.S. interests in the region. On the other hand, this climate of distrust explains, at least in part, "the desire of Central Asian leaders to maintain a cordial understanding with the powerful neighbour Russia" (Bahgat, 2006:17).

### *The objectives of Russia*

Contrary to the United States, Russia holds a long tradition of good relations with the regional states, if only because they were part of the former Soviet Union for more than seven decades. Therefore, one can understand why the demographic, cultural and economic bonds resisted political independence in 1992. Indeed, the influence of Russian culture is still dominant in the region. This is manifest through several examples. Many members of the political and economic elites speak Russian, and pay for their childrens' studies in Russian universities. On the other hand, many Russians live in the states of the region, particularly in Kazakhstan, where they constitute more than 30% of the population (Torbakov, 2007). Finally, more than one and a half decade after independence, the economies of these countries continue to depend heavily on Russia, especially with respect to the energy sector.

The strategy of Moscow towards Central Asia aims to achieve, basically, two objectives. First, ensure the leading role of Russia in the exploitation and exploration, development and transportation of Central Asian energy resources. Moscow dominates the natural gas exports from Turkmenistan and plays an important mission, by controlling Kazakh oil exports. On the other hand, Russian companies play a key role in the exploitation of oil and gas reserves in the Caspian Sea, in cooperation with the governments of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan (Torbakov, 2007). According to Isabel Gorst (2006: 12), "it is important to stress that Russian natural gas production has been relatively weak in recent years", such that "Russia plans to increase its gas imports from the Caspian Sea/Central Asia, where Moscow acquires it at very low prices, to then sell to European markets for a much higher value". On the other hand, as stated by Catherine Belton (2006: 6), "the control of various pipeline routes provides Russia with bargaining power, leaving the regional states, geographically isolated, with little room for manoeuvre".

According to Richard Weitz (2006: 158), "Russia is interested in maintaining its status of dominant power in the region, resisting what some Russian military see as U.S. interference in the zone of Russian influence, in its near abroad". In fact, as underlined by Weitz (2006: 158), "many Russian officials believe the U.S. presence is a source of instability par excellence". This perception has to do directly with the fact that the senior members of the Russian armed forces and security services have traditionally been anti-American and do not accept a weakening of Moscow's influence in the region.

Indeed, they consider the expansion of NATO and the growing U.S. military presence in Central Asia a direct threat to Russian national security (Bergman, 2004/05).

### *The objectives of China*

China views Central Asia as an extraordinary opportunity to ensure the security of its energy supply. In fact, Beijing is driven by important security reasons by trying to establish with the Republics of Central Asia "a traditional relationship of vassalage, through investment, trade and military cooperation" (Swanstrom, 2005: 570).

Due to its enormous importance in the business world, in terms of the discovery of oil and gas, as well as its strategic location, Central Asia has been interpreted as the *Lebensraum* of China, or the beginning of the *New Great Game*, according to P. Hopkirk, the commencement of the *clash of civilizations*, according to S. Huntington (1999), or as the emergence of the *great chess*, in the view of Z. Brzezinski (Zhang and Xu, 2004-2005).

Chinese strategic thinking over the Caspian Sea/Central Asia is quite similar to that of neighbouring Russia. Beijing and Moscow share three main strategic objectives: develop the region's energy resources, contain the extremist and separatist movements, as well as resist the increasing presence (economic, military and strategic) of the U.S. in the region. However, one shall note that China's capacity to 'punish' or 'reward' the regional actors is smaller than that of Washington or Moscow. On the other hand, "the rising Chinese economic and military power suggests that Beijing's strategy towards Central Asia tends to become more assertive in the relatively near future" (Bahgat, 2006: 20).

According to Narana Coissoró, Moscow no longer holds much control over these republics and, on the other hand, the United States is almost unknown in the general view of these countries, although they have established diplomatic relations (Coissoró, 2010). According to the author, China is the one playing the role of main interlocutor, considering that Beijing has no expansionist ambitions in relation to Central Asian states, as it would disturb the regional balance, as well as "Chinese economic growth (Coissoró, 2010).

### **Two games, two realities**

#### **Differences and similarities between the *Great Game* and the *New Great Game***

Having characterized the original *Great Game*, as well as the *New Great Game*, we will now point out their main differences, in order to attempt to understand the 'validity' and meaning of the second. In this context, we intend to investigate the applicability and accuracy of the concept of *New Great Game*.

This analysis will be based on a comparison of the following topics: location, actors, objectives and means used by one and the other game.

Starting with the location, it is important to recognize that it is this element that enables the continuity between the two Great Games. Although they do not exactly coincide in terms of 'geographical location', there is no denying that both occurred in the same region. Of course, the term region may prove to be somewhat vague and relative, as it always depends on the criteria of the evaluator. If we base ourselves on the historical references inherent to the *Great Game*, we find that they are able to mention specific places such as the Pankisi Gorge (in Northeast Georgia), or others far vaster and vaguer: the Eurasian continent (Fromkin, 1980). Faced with such ambiguity, a certain amount of overlapping is inevitable concerning the geographical context of one and the other game. On the other hand, there is no way around the geographical similarities of both games, if we consider the importance that Afghanistan had within the framework of the *Great Game*, and which it still continues to have on the (economic, political, military and cultural) imperatives of the *New Great Game*. It is important to note, however, that the exact geographical area - which is mentioned by a large body of literature about the *New Great Game* - corresponds to the Caspian Sea basin, located hundreds of miles west of Afghanistan (Kelly, 2000).



**Fig.3. The Great Game's imagery**

<http://www.international.ucla.edu/media/images/ScholarandKing>

And what of the actors? Here the differences are quite clear, being notorious when comparing the two games. As previously discussed, the actors in the *Great Game* were the Russian and British empires. There was a blatant disregard for any other player, whether a local leader or even an indigenous people - all should yield to the interests of the British and Russians. With the *New Great Game*, the players have changed significantly, not only in numbers but also in category. Whereas the British Empire disappeared, the Russian Empire (subsequently, the Soviet Union) disintegrated. From that moment on, instead of two direct competitors, there is now a vast array of rivals, among

which are Pakistan, China, Iran, Israel, Turkey, the United States and also Russia. Of course, to these actors it is necessary to add the new Central Asian republics that emerged following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

It is also important to emphasize that these five (recent) states have, each one, their own goals, ambitions and methods of achieving them, which has radically transformed the existing power play in the region. Such states are far from being 'insignificant' in the regional balance of power, as they have the ability to position themselves in the game to their advantage, according to their interests. In fact, as Stanley Hoffman states, "it is a mistake to treat the issues in which these countries are involved as if they were pawns in a game of global equilibrium instead of taking into account the intrinsic merits and interests of the nations" (Hoffman, 1978: 175). To another author, Boris Rumer, Central Asian countries are certainly not 'secondary actors'. In fact, for Rumer, it is essentially due to the fact that these states (also) have ambitions and interests at the regional level that one can and should speak of a "second level of analysis of the *New Great Game*", considering that the first level is directly linked to competition between the major powers in Central Asia (Rumer, 1993: 89). On the other hand, we must not forget the non-State actors, as these are also part (and quite actively, in fact) of the second level of analysis of the *New Great Game*. Such players are also divided into the supra-State (as in the case of NATO, the United Nations and the OSCE) and the infra-State category (of which we highlight the non-governmental organizations, multinational companies, pressure groups, terrorist groups and criminal organizations).

We now turn to a brief comparison of the objectives of both games. The *Great Game* was basically a zero-sum game. This means that an increase of Russian influence in the region could only be made at the expense of a reduction of British influence (or vice-versa). The purpose of the *Great Game* was based on the geopolitical and imperial domination of the region, through direct administration, hegemonic influence or favorable ideological alliance. In turn, the objectives of the *New Great Game* are more diverse and complex, encompassing, at the state level, the establishment of a neo-imperialist hegemony, the formation of a cultural alliance, regional influence and the importance attributed to the security-related concerns of the states involved. At the non-State level, priorities are focused mainly on maximizing benefits in an attempt to secure contracts and the dominant position in consortia, as well as in local influence and in politico-religious objectives.

Finally, we shall address the means used by the *Great Game* and the *New Great Game*. One of the most evident differences has to do with the fact that in the second game, the 'reckless' use of military force seems to be much more limited, in spite of being difficult to quantify. In fact, the aggressive use of power is hardly acceptable in the contemporary international system. Certainly, there are still demonstrations of force here and there, but we must recognize that the degree to which it is exercised - without legal justification - has declined over the years, between the former *Great Game* and the *New Great Game*.

Apart from the degree and intensity of the use of military force, we must bear in mind that the old *Great Game* was, in general, a 'backstage' dispute, a war of 'secret agents' acting in small groups or alone, left, sometimes to their own initiative. Military force, however, was seen as a tool to help strengthen

hegemony and control. As for the *New Great Game*, it is important to mention that the variety of objectives of the actors is the cause, in turn, of a multitude of methods in order to consolidate political influence in Central Asia, ranging from the formation of corporate alliances, manipulation of the press and diplomatic negotiations, to the mobilization of troops. Unlike the original version, which resorted to secret agents operating *per se*, the *New Great Game* occurs both on the ground, that is, in Central Asia and the Transcaucasia, and through negotiations that take place in London, New York or Moscow.

The old *Great Game* was related to direct competition between two powers, with no other form of interference being tolerated. The context of the period, characterized by the construction and expansion of Empires, was conducive to changes of state borders or even their dissolution being possible and, in addition, used as a political tool. Indeed, the states in which the *Great Game* took place, did not enjoy the protection of any of the Empires, being treated as mere 'pawns'. However, in the context of the contemporary international system, the competition of the *New Great Game* is quite different. In fact, the dissolution of Empires, after World War II, along with the creation of the United Nations and the consolidation of the international legal system, gave rise to a system of state protection, in which countries' borders, their integrity and sovereignty must be respected within the framework of international law. All these changes in the international system have a considerable impact on the *New Great Game*, since states can no longer be violated, dissolved, annihilated or controlled, contrary to what happened in the past.

An interesting feature about the *Great Game*, as stated by Edward Ingram, is that "it was not essential to beat the opponent, provided this did not imply, however, one's own defeat" (Ingram, 1979: 339). In the *New Great Game*, the situation is different, since here the primary objective is, clearly, to win. On the other hand, it must be noted that the cost/benefit analysis of the two games is quite different. In the case of the *Great Game*, the advantage lies in the enhanced security and in the prestige provided by territorial control, whereas, in general, the costs of territorial gains were much higher than the benefits thereof (Odom, 1998). However, with respect to the rewards of the *New Great Game*, these are more obvious and abundant: monetary gain, the guarantee of energy supplies, national economic growth, 'rebirth' of the Islamic culture, strengthening of the political and military position. In turn, the costs of the *New Great Game* can be measured, on the one hand, financially, in billions of dollars, and on the other, in terms of security-related concerns, as these are incommensurable (Odom, 1998).

There is another important aspect in the comparison of both games, which should not be overlooked: the nature of politics. Indeed, if the essence of the *Great Game* gave privilege to the issue of colonization and the military dispute between two Empires, the *New Great Game* has nothing to do with *high politics*. Instead, it moves in the sphere of low politics, since the issues it addresses relate to "the creation of niches of influence in Central Asia" (Shams-Ud-Din, 1997: 340).

## **New Great Game: a 'valid' concept?**

Given the considerable differences and short similarities between the two games, we can ask ourselves to what extent the term *New Great Game* is, or has been, properly used to describe the climate of competition (for access to energy resources, among others) lived in Central Asia. In the opinion of certain authors, among whom, Matthew Edwards, the concept does not apply correctly to the regional environment. In fact, today the political, economic, military and cultural situation is radically different from the one of the *Great Game* (Edwards, 2003).

In practice, the only real similarities between the *Great Game* and the *New Great Game*, although scarce, focus on the geographical location and on the romantic, exotic, remote and obscure perspective pointed out by some commentators about the events that take place in the Transcaucasus and Central Asia. That said, and due to the poor symbiosis between the two games, there is, to a certain extent, the danger that the meaning commonly attributed to the concept of the *New Great Game* is not fully understood.

The question of whether or not there is, in fact, a *New Great Game*, has not been (yet) definitively answered. On the other hand, academics, commentators and analysts who use this concept without restrictions, end up, directly or indirectly, making it look like they agree with it.

For Jaffe et al., "the situation experienced in Central Asia, where the interests of big oil companies and political dispute become blurred, is much more similar to the difficulties involved in obtaining concessions in Saudi Arabia (about 100 years ago) than the nineteenth-century *Great Game*, casually mentioned in the case of the Caspian Sea resources" (Jaffe et al., 2000: 75). Or, as stated laconically by Shams-Ud-Din, "the geopolitics of contemporary Central Asia is qualitatively different from the nineteenth century *Great Game*" (Shams-Ud-Din, 1997: 342).

According to Matthew Edwards, "the concept of *New Great Game* only makes sense in case it refers to a situation that is unique" (Edwards, 2003: 94). Now, this is not what occurs, given that the struggle for influence is an integral component of the international economic and political system. In fact, as underlined by Stephen Blank, "the actors act according to the old tenets of realism and realpolitik" (Blank, 1999: 150). On the other hand, many of the measures they take, and which aim to increase their political influence, form part of the very logic of the market economy.

The events described in the *New Great Game* are not confined to Central Asia, which leads us to question whether or not they can be isolated from the context of the international system, the market economy and political realities. Resorting to the most common example of the *New Great Game* - the dispute for concessions of oil and natural gas - one easily verifies that situations such as these occur in every place rich in energy resources, often with the same actors (or type of actors) that are involved in Central Asia. For example, commercial interactions similar to those that take place in Central Asia, have already taken place in Saudi Arabia at the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as in Nigeria, in recent decades.



One should not think, however, that the fact that companies are constantly competing to ensure their contracts are guaranteed is something that happens only with oil or natural gas companies. In fact, in any business situation in which two or more companies are present, it is natural, if not obvious, that they compete with each other and try to find the best way to gain customers. In this context, we could easily argue, using the model provided by the promoters of the *New Great Game*, that there are, after all, other '*New Great Games*' under development in the world. Therefore, it is clearly understandable that the situation in Central Asia cannot be considered entirely 'unique'.

There is another aspect that contributes to making the analogy between the *Great Game* and the *New Great Game* even more unlikely. If the former excluded any form of cooperation, the latter is based, as strange as it may seem, to a large extent, on exactly that. In fact, competition continues to be part of the market economy, although the multinationals which exploit oil and gas are linked together through various partnerships and consortia around the world, demonstrating that they favor cooperation. But not only multinationals, since, at the state level, there has also been a strong desire for cooperation with regard to import and export of oil and natural gas, since no state is able, by itself, to dominate the market. Indeed, the alleged competition with respect to the pipeline routes has not prevented these from being built, passing through, for this purpose, the territory of several regional states. Even Russia and China, which compete directly, as we know, for political influence in the region, prioritize economic, political and military cooperation, among other fields (*The Moscow Times*, 2002). If we require another example of how the concept of the *New Great Game* is inadequate to the realities of Central Asia, all we need to do is refer to multilateral synergies, present, among other issues, in the emergence of various treaties and organizations, such as the *Tashkent Collective Security Treaty* (1992), the *Central Asian Nuclear Weapons Free Zone* (1993), the *Central Asian Economic Community* (1994), or the *Shanghai Forum* (2000) (Allison and Jonson, 2001).

In addition to the arguments already mentioned, the question of the exact importance of the alleged *New Great Game* should also be addressed. On the other hand, the place it occupies in the political affairs of each state must also be examined in order to try to answer the question that was put over half a century ago: "Is the dispute for control of Central Asia a crucial issue in the context of world politics?" (Strausz-Hupé, 1942: 155). The answer is no, if one takes into account the interests of the major powers of today that, contrary to the Russian and British Empires of the nineteenth century, do not see in the region (in spite of the importance that it has) a priority area in terms of foreign policy. In fact, the Russia of Yeltsin and, subsequently, of Putin has mainly sought the 'path of the West' with regards to its foreign policy, focusing on the expansion of NATO and on the defense against ballistic missiles (Harada, 1997). On the other hand, it has been argued that "Western and Central Asia plays a secondary role in Chinese foreign policy, since it does not seek direct political or economic influence" (Maass, 1999: 77). And, although the economic potential of Central Asia is relevant in the eyes of Beijing (in fact, as much as the security issues related to Xinjiang), we verify, once again, that the most important issues of foreign policy and security are not located in Central Asia.

With regards to the security theme, the Taiwan issue absorbs Beijing's attention almost entirely, while at the energy level, the potential of Central Asia is compensated by the existing resources in the seas of Southern China and in Siberia. Finally, in the case of the United States, it is important to stress that until the contours of September 11 became clear, Central Asia was, in terms of security, little more than a complement in U.S. military strategy, considering that Washington has focused its attention mainly to the West, the Persian Gulf in particular. Even now, the American interest in Central Asia will probably be of short duration.

### **Brief conclusions**

It is possible to ascertain that the actors, objectives and methods used by one and the other game are so disparate that they lead us to question the true validity and applicability of the concept of the *New Great Game*. In conclusion, despite the relative banality in which the term has plunged, it cannot be accepted as an absolute and 'untouchable' truth. Why insist on resorting to a concept that, in the end, has little or nothing to do with the *Great Game*? On the other hand, as this article sought to demonstrate, the *New Great Game* is anything but ... 'new'. It has nothing really new or unique that can possibly justify such a designation. In fact, competition for energy resources is not an 'exclusive' characteristic of Central Asia. Competition is, on the contrary, present in the various quarters of the world economy. And speaking of competition, it is important to remember that not even this concept is a point of convergence between the two games since, unlike the original *Great Game*, the second does not demonize cooperation, instead it values it.

Guided by the prudent analysis of geopolitics, historical evidence contributes to the deconstruction of the false image that has been established around the notion of the *New Great Game*. Strictly speaking, there is less in common between the two games than that which separates them.

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