



CENTRAL ASIA: THE GREAT GAME IN THE NEW GLOBAL DISORDER OF THE 21ST CENTURY

THE OLD ORDER HAS CLEARLY COLLAPSED, AND THERE IS NO NEW
ORDER ON THE HORIZON

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The Great Game was the term coined in the 19th century popularized in the 1901 novel *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling, to describe the rivalry between the British and Russian Empires over Afghanistan that extended out to neighboring states in Central and Southern Asia. It involved constant tensions with Russia and Britain playing on the Central Asian chessboard; a number of wars erupted.

The Great Game was believed to have ended in 1895; in light of the many tectonically disruptive developments of the 20th century, notably the rise and conquests of the Soviet Union, it would seem to have been relegated to the annals of history.

However, Central Asia clearly has become and will increasingly become a key global geopolitical arena; the Great Game is back, albeit with a different set of players.

In a sense, the Great Game made its reappearance with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. In retaliation, the Americans boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games with the Russians responding in similar fashion four years later in Los Angeles. In 1989, the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, the war having been a major factor in the collapse of the Soviet Empire two years later, as it had been a factor ultimately in the collapse of the British Empire in the 19th century and may prove a factor in the coming collapse of the American Empire or what pundits call *Pax Americana* in the 21st century?

The US-USSR conflict over Afghanistan was clearly a phenomenon that belonged to the 20th century paradigm of the Cold War. Just over ten years after the Russians left Afghanistan with their tails between their legs, the Americans invaded Afghanistan (in 2001), making it the longest war in American history. Experiencing similar frustrating stalemates to those experienced by the British and the Russians, the US has been bogged down in Afghanistan, counting well over 2,000 soldiers killed and ten times that amount, 25,000, wounded in action. President-elect Donald Trump has said he would bring about the total withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan. Though it remains to be seen which election pledges Trump will be likely, or indeed able, to keep, I think that this one he will be likely to uphold.

While the old order has clearly collapsed, there is as yet no new order discernible on the horizon – thus the “new disorder”. This applies not only to geopolitics and international relations, but also the world of international trade and investment. Though the WTO, for example, was established at the very end of the 20th century (1995), it has been mired in a 20th century framework, failing to adjust to the new forces and dynamics of the 21st. Perhaps multilateralism is not consistent with multipolarity. There is a need for a leader. The US has failed to exert its leadership role since the beginning of this century – and especially following the 2003 invasion of Iraq – hence the vacuum. Western global governance and its institutions are no longer operational.

Thus, while throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the world was perceived essentially from a western prism, there is an imperative to adjust lenses to far more diverse and complex global realities. As the major cultural, economic, political and geopolitical Eurasian crossroads, with borders extending to the Muslim world, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Russia, China, Pakistan and India, Central Asia is clearly a most relevant vantage point from which to look at world. There is a definite global trend towards “non-Western values”. One might add that following Brexit and the Trump victory, the West too may be abandoning contemporary Western values.

It may be noted in passing that so-called Western values of liberalism, democracy, openness, etc., were hardly prominent throughout much of Western history and apply mainly to developments in the second half of the 20th century. Certainly, however, not only are we witnessing a decline in Western hard power, but also in soft power. Many Americans have expressed embarrassment in respect to Trump’s election. And the European Union is growing irrelevant. Though there are many uncertainties in this new global disorder, the increasing marginalization of Europe on the global stage would appear a near-certainty.

The New Silk Road and Maritime Route, or OBOR (One Belt One Road), is on the rise just as the European “Union” might be unravelling. Asia may be reconnecting – or might be undergoing what has been termed the re-Asianization of Asia. In contrast to the waning presence and influence of the European Union, the little-known Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), of which Kazakhstan was a founding member in 1996 (along with China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) is growing in influence. In similar vein, with the WTO likely to remain moribund and the deaths of the US driven mega-regionals (TPP and TTIP), probably much more attention should be directed at RCEP (the (Asian) Regional Economic Cooperation Partnership).

Whatever form the emerging new global “order” will take obviously remains to be seen, but in the process, Central Asia generally will be a key space to watch and from which to watch.

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