

Crisis looms in central Asia's Great Game.

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Sixteen years ago this month there was panic across central Asia. Having captured Kabul, the Taliban were moving northwards and some commanders were threatening to Talibanise the entire region. That prompted Russia and China to promise support to the ex-Soviet states across the region.

Post September 11 the Taliban threat receded but today central Asians are once again panicking at the thought of US troops exiting Afghanistan. Added to the threat of a resurgent Taliban are domestic Islamist extremist groups such as the [Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan \(IMU\)](#), whose members have spent the past decade in Pakistan's tribal regions and are now, armed and battle ready, re-entering central Asia through northern Afghanistan.

A flurry of security officials from Nato, the US and the EU have been visiting the region trying to reassure the governments in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan that border Afghanistan, and fragile Kyrgyzstan, over increased aid and security. US officials are also believed to be offering sales of unwanted heavy weapons from the Afghan theatre.

But at the same time Russia and China are trying to wean those governments away from the US, with Vladimir Putin in particular making a determined effort [to return central Asia to Russia's backyard](#). In October Mr Putin signed a new 30-year treaty to secure a base in Tajikistan. A joint Russian-Tajik statement spoke of "the threat of terrorism and drug trafficking from Afghanistan". The 7,000 Russian troops based in Tajikistan might increase. A month earlier Mr Putin had signed a treaty with Kyrgyzstan extending an air base lease for 20 years.

China has been offering greater security through the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation - a regional pact that is yet to really take off - as well as using its long term ally Pakistan to gain influence with the Taliban. India too has a growing presence, with a military base in Tajikistan and oil and mineral stakes in Kazakhstan.

This represents an intensification of the new Great Game that erupted in the region after the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Mr Putin's aim is to ensure that the US is left with little presence in the region. At present Russia allows Nato supplies to travel through its territory to Afghanistan. The US has negotiated similar rights for its withdrawal from Afghanistan to reduce dependence on the southern route, which Pakistan closed earlier this year during a spat with the US. But Russia will make sure that these transit facilities end after 2014.

Russia is also adamantly opposing US plans to maintain small military bases in Afghanistan post-2014 for special forces, drone missiles and trainers for the Afghan army.

So far only Uzbekistan has dissented from the Russian line. In July President Islam Karimov withdrew from the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) of pro-Moscow states. He has also offered the Americans long-term facilities and is negotiating for US weapons supplies. But even if Mr Karimov - a ruthless dictator who has refused to carry out economic reforms - can resist Russian pressure for long, he is hardly an ideal ally for the west.

In the meantime Nato forces in northern Afghanistan are doing their best to eliminate the central Asian Islamic militant groups. The IMU in particular has proved to be a long-term threat and is now closely tied to al-Qaeda and Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Taiba. Counting only a few hundred Uzbek and Tajik fighters in the late 1990s, the group now has thousands of militants drawn from all central Asian states as well as China, Turkey, Azerbaijan

and Chechnya.

Yet for all the anxiety in Moscow and Washington about the shifting balance of power in Afghanistan, it does not represent the greatest threat to central Asia. What could really undermine the ex-Soviet states is the increasing pauperisation of their people, the collapse of services such as health and education, and the excesses of dictators and failure of governments - except for Kyrgyzstan's - to carry out any political, social or economic reforms. Unfortunately as the new Great Game continues, both Russia and the US are ignoring the social and economic crisis that is about to erupt in central Asia. That crisis will not be because of Afghanistan.