

## Great Game Reloaded

Defense Secretary Rumsfeld fights off a Russian and Chinese challenge in Central Asia, but a long struggle lies ahead  
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Yale Global - 26/07/2005

By Ahmed Rashid / Lahore

In a major twist to the continuing Great Game on Central Asia's landmass, Russia and China are attempting to reclaim the dominant role in the region that they ceded to the US in the aftermath of 9/11. Though their ham-handed attempt to expel American bases from the region has been foiled for the moment, the jockeying for power, influence and resources in this neuralgic region, put on hold until now, is back in full force. Beneficiaries in the latest phase of the Great Game may well be the small countries in the region if they can deftly play one against the other.

The latest act of the game was played out in the open when US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld flew into Bishkek on July 25 to foil the Russian-Chinese attempt. Kyrgyz Defense Minister Ismail Isakov, standing with Rumsfeld, assured him that the Americans would not leave in a hurry. "The presence of the US base fully depends on the situation in Afghanistan," Isakov said and added: "Today the minister (Rumsfeld) noted that the situation in Afghanistan has not finally got back to normal."

The first move in the game of diplomatic chess came on July 5 when Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao, while meeting with the four Central Asian Republics at a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Astana, Kazakhstan, made an unprecedented demand for the withdrawal of US troops from the region. The SCO statement said that as stability returns to Afghanistan, foreign troops are no longer needed in Central Asia.

"As the active military phase in the anti-terror operation in Afghanistan is nearing completion" the statement said, it was time "to decide on the deadline for the use of the temporary infrastructure and for their military contingents presence" in member countries. The July 5 demands - first of their kind by the SCO - reconfigure the organization as a major alliance in the Central Asian region, firmly in the hands of Russia and China and a major challenger to NATO's Partnership for Peace program in Central Asia.

In subsequent statements by Moscow designed to put pressure on the Central Asian states to act quickly, it was evident that Russia was prepared to live with the threats still emanating from Afghanistan, in order to drive the Americans out of Central Asia. China, which has always been apprehensive of US troops based close to its borders, was keen to voice its demands through an international organization, rather than pick an individual fight with the US.

However, the SCO demand rested on the flimsy grounds that Afghanistan is secure, which contradicts Russia's lamentations of the failure of President Hamid Karzai and US forces to stabilize the situation there and assertion that the Afghans are giving sanctuary to Islamic extremists accused of stirring up trouble in Uzbekistan and Chechnya. Just between March 1 and July 25, 700 people were killed due to Taliban resurgence as the country prepared to hold parliamentary elections on September 18.

The US has rebuffed the SCO demand and said it would hold talks with each individual state. Rumsfeld's Bishkek meeting was the first. In the aftermath of 9/11 the US established two major bases in the region: the first at Karshi-Khanabad, or K2, in southern Uzbekistan, and the other at Manas International Airport in Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek. Both have serviced US troops and aircraft in Afghanistan. Presently 800 US troops are stationed in Uzbekistan and 1000 in Kyrgyzstan. France and NATO set up air bases in Tajikistan at Dushanbe and Kuliob in the south. Russia has military and air bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but there is no SCO demand for their withdrawal.

The Pentagon maintains that these bases are primarily important for its Afghan operation. But they are also critical to wider US ambitions in the region. Further goals include controlling oil supplies from the Caspian Basin - especially now that a wholly owned Western pipeline transporting oil from Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to the Mediterranean via Turkey is in operation - and Rumsfeld's plan to set up "lily-pads," or small bases around the world that can be activated in a hurry to provide access to US troops.

In fact, the trigger to change the position of Russia and China has been their fear that the recent dramatic events in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan may have increased US influence in the region. In the spring, Kyrgyzstan's long term President Askar Akayev was swept from power and replaced by an interim government headed by Kumanbek Bakiyev, who on July 10 won the first free and fair presidential elections held in Central Asia.

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Both China and Russia have thrown their weight behind the region's autocratic rulers in order to prevent further regime change or moves towards greater democracy.

The role played by US-funded NGOs and events in Kyrgyzstan, although far from the democratic revolutions that swept Georgia and Ukraine, angered Russia and China. Moscow especially felt that the loss of its former communist satraps in Central Asia would weaken its influence and usher in pro-US leaders.

In Uzbekistan, however, the Pentagon faces a far more difficult task. The massacre of protestors by President Islam Karimov's security forces in Andijan on May 13, sparked worldwide outrage against the regime. The killings of an estimated 700 innocent people led to widespread condemnation by the US, the UN and the European Union and a demand for an independent enquiry into the massacre, which Karimov refused.

Since the Andijan massacre, Karimov has been assiduously courted by Russia and China. He has visited both countries and enlisted their support in rejecting calls for an independent enquiry. Russia, which has had an on and off relationship with Karimov in the past now cemented its relationship, while China had extracted oil and gas concessions from Uzbekistan.

Since the SCO summit all three Central Asian states with Western bases have themselves called on the US to review base agreements, although as Kyrgyz leaders made clear, they were being forced to do so by Russia. As General Richard Myers, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, put it: "It looks to me like two very large countries were trying to bully some smaller countries."

Although Uzbekistan has not yet agreed to the continued base facility, it is unlikely to seriously want the Americans out. They were happy to become US partners after 9/11 in order to receive greater US aid, but also to keep the demands of Russia and China at a distance and balance out all three superpowers in the region.

None of the Central Asian countries can afford to antagonize the US to the extent that Russia wants them to, while they value good relations with the West. They are just as keen to keep Russia at a distance. Ultimately they will reassure the Americans about base agreements, albeit charging greater fees. They will then have to appease Russia and China, possibly by granting Russia additional basing rights.

When Secretary Rumsfeld returns home this week he will have won the first skirmish in the battle for the control of Central Asia, but maintenance of the US bases and political influence will now require closer and constant attention. The Great Game that once preoccupied Czarist Russia and the British Empire has just been revived, and the stakes are higher than ever.