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**Shaping a new world order:
The Gulf and the greater Middle East stake their claim**
James M. Dorsey

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Abstract

The 21st century's Great Game is about the creation of a new Eurasia-centred world. It locks China, the United States, Russia, India, Japan and Europe into what is an epic battle. Yet, they are not the only players. Middle Eastern rivals, Saudi Arabia and Iran, are key players too. As they vie for big power favour, they compete to secure the ability to shape the future architecture of Eurasia's energy landscape, enhance leverage by increasing energy and oil product market share, and position themselves as the key nodes in infrastructure networks.

With China, Russia, the United States, India and Japan as the heavy weights, the Great Game is unlikely to produce an undisputed winner. Nor do key players perceive it as a zero-sum-game. The stakes in the game are about divvying up the pie and ensuring that China despite its vast resources, economic leverage, and first starter advantage in infrastructure linkages, does not emerge as the sole dominant power in Eurasia's future architecture.

Short Bio

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A Game of Risk

The battle lines are all but cast in cement. For now, the Great Game pits China together with Russia, Turkey and Iran against the United States, India, Japan and Australia. The two camps compete for influence, if not dominance, in a swath of land that stretches from the China Sea to the Atlantic coast of Europe. The flash-points are multiple. They range from the China Sea to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Central European nations and far beyond with Russia, China and Turkey reaching into America's backyard by supporting embattled Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro.¹

The stakes for the United States and China are seizing as large a slice of the pie as possible. For players, such as Europe, Russia and Japan, it is about guaranteeing that they remain influential stakeholders. Efforts to restrain China's rise are aided by growing anti-China resentment in key nodes of the People's Republic's 65-nation, \$1 trillion Belt and Road initiative and increased questioning of China's business and political practices. Some of the alliances in the shaping of Eurasia's future are opportunistic rather than strategic. This is particularly true for Russian ties to China and Iran. The contours of potential conflicts of interest are already evident and likely to impact the degree to which China will have a free reign.

Largely underrated in debates about the Great Game is the fact that increasingly there is a tacit meeting of the minds among world leaders as well as conservative and far-right politicians and activists that frames the rivalry: the rise of civilisation-alism and the civilizational state that seeks its legitimacy in a distinct civilization rather than the nation state's concept of territorial integrity, language and citizenry.

Although Arab autocrats think in civilizational terms, they have stopped short of justifying their rule in civilizational terms. They have, however, enthusiastically embraced the civilizational state's rejection of western notions of democracy and human rights. One reason why Arab autocracies have not overtly embraced civilisation-alism is the absence of a collective memory in post-Ottoman Arab lands.

To explicitly embrace civilisation-alism as a concept, Arab states would have to cloak themselves in the civilizational mantle of either pan-Islamism or pan-Arabism, which in turn would require regional integration. That would run counter to the attempt by Saudi Arabia and the UAE to impose their will on the Middle East, for example with the boycott of Qatar, potentially amounts to an attempt to create a basis for a regional integration that they would dominate.

1- Hurriyet Daily News, Venezuelan President Maduro hails support of Turkey, Russia, China, 25 January 2019, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/venezuelan-president-maduro-hails-support-of-turkey-russia-china-140755>

Haunting the Great Game and the players' plotting of strategy are numerous black swans. The Paris-based European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) developed scenarios for some of the swans. Conceptualized in a report, "What If? Scanning the horizon: 12 scenarios for 2021,"² the scenarios were grounded in recent trends and could prove to be game changers that radically rejigger the Great Game's current line-up.

The scenarios or grey swans in the report's terminology, if they unfold in reality, suggest that alliances in Eurasia are opportunistic and transactional and can like in Risk, a popular game of diplomacy, conflict and conquest played on a board depicting a political map of the earth, divided into forty-two territories, which are grouped into six continents, turn players on their erstwhile allies as interests diverge and re-converge. In Risk, multiple players commanding armies that seek to capture territories engage in a complex dance as they strive for advantage and seek to compensate for weaknesses. Players form opportunistic alliances that could change at any moment. Potential grey and black swans threaten to disrupt.

The stakes in the Great Game could not be higher. Analysis of five of the report's scenarios suggests that fragility is greatest in the efforts of China, Russia, Turkey and Iran, shaped by varying degrees of tension in relations with the United States, to rebalance global power in their favour. The four countries' strained relations with the United States are, however, not immutable. Likewise, Russia's effort to lock in former Soviet republics with its Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) that groups Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, and Armenia could prove to be on shaky ground. Russia's alliance with Turkey and China as well as Iran even if the report has not developed the latter scenario may be on thinner ice than meets the eye.

The same can be said for grey swans in the United States' ties to its long-standing allies as is played out in the report's scenario for a withdrawal of US troops from Europe as a result of President Donald J. Trump's accentuation of diverging trans-Atlantic interests. With a multi-polar world the likely outcome of the battle for Eurasia, the scenarios suggest that the perceived decline of the United States, despite Mr. Trump's unilateralism, is not irreversible. Similarly, depending on how it plays its cards, Iran could emerge either as a winner or a loser.

Four of the report's scenarios involve a renewed round of popular protest in the Arab world following the reversal of successful revolts in 2011 in Egypt, Libya and Yemen and the embrace of brutal repression; political violence in the Cau-

2- Florence Gaub (ed.), *What if ... Conceivable crises: unpredictable in 2021*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 25 January 2019, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/what-if-scanning-horizon-12-scenarios-2021>

casus that pits Turkey against Russia and could threaten key nodes along China's Belt and Road; the dissolution of the Eurasian Economic Union in an approaching post-Vladimir Putin era; a rejiggering of the political map of south-eastern Europe and a strengthening of European cohesion with the US troop withdrawal and resolution of tension between Serbia and Kosovo. Analysts Fiona Hill and Omer Taspinar dubbed the Turkish-Russian alliance as an axis of the excluded involving "states with histories of conflict, deep structural differences and divergent views, which seem to have come together more out of frustration with the United States than a new strategic vision of world affairs."³

The notion of renewed popular Arab protests, including resistance to the influence of militias in Syria and Libya, that could rewrite the political map of the Middle East is hardly far-fetched with mass anti-government demonstrations in Sudan⁴ and Algeria;⁵ riots in Tunisia, the one relatively successful 2011 revolt; protests on the West Bank against a new social security law⁶ and US efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict⁷; and anti-government marches in Iran⁸ and Iraq.⁹

If anything, the revolts and protests highlight the risks that all players in the Great Game run by supporting autocratic regimes that have largely failed to sustainably deliver public goods and services and/or offer good governance and cater to the social, economic and political aspirations of young populations.

"Pressure for change across the Arab world is likely to continue to grow, keeping pace with the growth in populations, inequality and social injustice," concluded

3- Fiona Hill and Omer Taspinar, Turkey and Russia: Axis of the Excluded? Brookings, 1 March 2006, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/turkey-and-russia-axis-of-the-excluded/>

4- Declan Walsh, On Sudan's Streets, Young Professionals Protest Against an Autocrat, The New York Times, 24 January 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/24/world/africa/sudan-protests-omar-hasan-al-bashir.html>

5- James McAuley, On Algerian streets, hope for revolutionary change. But history haunts the protesters, The Washington Post, 27 June 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/on-algerian-streets-hope-for-revolutionary-change-but-history-haunts-the-protesters/2019/06/26/35448878-92c1-11e9-956a-88c291ab5c38_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.d7099b580608

6- Akram Al-Waara, Thousands strike in West Bank in protest over PA social security law, Middle East Eye, 15 January 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/thousands-strike-west-bank-protest-over-pa-social-security-law>

7- Adam Rasgon, In West Bank, Palestinians march against US-led peace conference in Bahrain. The Times of Israel, 25 June 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-west-bank-palestinians-march-against-us-led-peace-conference-in-bahrain/>

8- Jamshid Barzegar, Iran protests signal simmering anti-government anger, Deutsche Welle, 17 May 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/iran-protests-signal-simmering-anti-government-anger/a-43826965>

9- Ahmed Aboulenein, Police fire live rounds to disperse protest in Iraq's Basra, Reuters, 14 December 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-protests/police-fire-live-rounds-to-disperse-protest-in-iraqs-basra-idUSKBN10D29K>

journalist Simon Tisdall on the eighth anniversary of the uprising in Egypt that toppled president Hosni Mubarak but was ultimately defeated by a military coup two years later.¹⁰

China: the Foremost Grey Swan

The European Union Institute's report imagines a massive attack on the Baku Kars rail line, a vital node in the Belt and Road's linking China to Europe that rekindles dormant local animosities as well as competing Russian and Turkish economic and geostrategic interests, prompting both Moscow and Ankara to lobby Washington for US support.

Similarly, a scenario envisaging Kazakhstan and Belarus withdrawing from the Eurasian Union because of its inability to live up to its ambition of furthering regional integration sparks fears in Moscow that the demise of the regional consortium could spark the collapse of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), a military alliance that groups the five Eurasian Union members as well as Tajikistan and hosts Afghanistan and Serbia as observers. The dissolution of the two organizations would significantly undermine Russia's regional standing.

Likewise, a swap of land between Serbia and Kosovo that ethnically would purify the two countries whose inter-communal relations have been poisoned by historic prejudices and recent wars opens a Pandora's Box across south-eastern Europe but eases their accession to the European Union while a US troop withdrawal would force EU members to focus on collective security.

It would only take one of these scenarios to unfold and potentially spark a revisiting of the current line-up in the Great Game. Any one of the scenarios is a realistic possibility. Said European Union Institute deputy director Florence Gaub in her introduction to the report: "Grey Swans share with Black Swans a high level of strategic impact, but there is more evidence to support the idea that they are actually possible... The analogy with the 1985 film 'Back to the Future' is pure coincidence, of course – but just as in the film, we sometimes need to take a trip to the future to inform our decision-making today."

Perhaps, the foremost grey swan is in China, a country in which Xi has replaced Deng Xiaoping's consensus-based approach toward decision-making and undermined institutionalization by concentrating power in his own hands. To do so, Xi has embedded the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) deeper than in decades into the country's political, social and economic life and the daily lives of its citizenry.

10- Simon Tisdall, Will corruption, cuts and protest produce a new Arab spring? The Guardian, 26 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/26/sudan-egypt-corruption-arab-spring>

Xi's success may also be his Achilles Heel. "For all its successes so far, however, the Xi model, fully realized, may simply be too much of a good thing. Too much party control—perhaps too consolidated into Xi's hands—has contributed to economic stagnation. The constant stream of often competing directives from Beijing has produced paralysis at the local level... Xi's predilection for state control in the economy has also starved the more efficient private sector of capital... The economic downturn has also stoked social discontent... broad social movements that cross age, gender, and class, such as those advocating women's and LGBTQ rights, have arisen alongside the traditional protests around the environment, wages, and pensions," said China scholar Elizabeth C. Economy.¹¹

The fallout of Xi's power grab is felt not only at home but also abroad and is at the root of mounting anti-Chinese sentiment in some countries and distrust of Chinese companies like controversial telecommunications giant Huawei in others. It has fed perceptions of Chinese companies as not just commercial competitors but as vehicles of the communist party that inhibit the marketing of local products and services in various parts of the world.

The fallout effects not only Chinese companies but also China's standing in the international community and its ability to wield soft power. China is on the defensive as a result of its brutal crackdown on Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang as well as its kidnapping of foreign nationals like Swedish book store owner Gui Minhai; arbitrary arrest of Canadian citizens in retaliation for the detention in Canada of a senior Huawei executive; and campaign to force Chinese overseas to toe the party line. "The negative consequences of Xi's approach have begun to hold China back from the finish line," Economy said, raising the spectre of a grey swan whose fall out would be felt far beyond China's borders.¹²

The bottom line pockmarked by grey and black swans is that the Great Game's outcome is unpredictable, and the question is how multi-polar Eurasia will turn out to be. Economic power, population size, assertiveness, and military might are key factors but may not be enough for China to become the unrivalled dominant power in Eurasia. It will, however, no doubt be a player. The Belt and Road virtually guarantees that with a budget projected to be at least three times what the United States spent on its history-changing Marshall Plan that helped Western Europe rise from

11- *Ibid.* Economy, The Problem with Xi's China Model, Foreign Affairs, 6 March 2019, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-03-06/problem-xis-china-model?utm_medium=newsletters&utm_source=twofa&utm_content=20190308&utm_campaign=TWOFA%20030719%20The%20Problem%20With%20Xi%E2%80%99s%20China%20Model&utm_term=FA%20This%20Week%20-%20112017

12- *Ibid.* Economy, The Problem with Xi's China Model.

the rubble after World War Two.¹³

China's financial and commercial muscle gives it a significant advantage in the geopolitics, but economics could also prove to be part of China's Achilles Heel. A Financial Times study concluded that 78 countries targeted for project development are among the world's most risky economies. On a scale of one to seven, the highest level of country risk, Belt and Road countries ranked on 5.2, a significantly higher risk than the 3.5 average for emerging markets and had a median rating by Moody's, the credit rating agency, that was the equivalent of non-investment junk investment grade.¹⁴

The risk was reflected on the balance sheets of major Chinese state-owned companies that build, operate and invest in many Belt and Road projects. The Financial Times study reported that China's top internationally active construction and engineering contractors active were almost four times more highly leveraged than their non-Chinese competitors. The high debt of Chinese companies was evident in a 9.2 average multiple for their total debt to ebitda - earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation, a common measure of a company's ability to repay its debts. Comparable non-Chinese companies have an average 2.4 multiple. In a bid to avert a financial crisis, the government has ordered state-owned companies to reduce their debt burden, in part by attributing greater importance to the viability of overseas projects.¹⁵

As a result, infrastructure investment in Asia's largest developing countries fell in 2017 and 2018 fuelled by deepening concern over the fiscal impact that Chinese-backed mega projects also had on their host countries. Chinese setbacks included the controversial renegotiation of debt in Sri Lanka, a Maldives request for debt relief,¹⁶ the cancellation of projects by Malaysia and Myanmar and the fact that the crisis in Venezuela had put at risk billions of US dollars of Chinese and Russian investment that was intended to bolster embattled President Nicolas Maduro. China was Venezuela's biggest foreign creditor, pumping more than US\$50 billion into the country over the past decade, mainly in exchange for oil supplies. The bulk of China's loans were extended by the China Development Bank, which

13- Richard Kozul-Wright and Daniel Poon, China's belt and road isn't like the Marshall Plan, but Beijing can still learn from it, South China Morning Post, 24 January 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/united-states/article/2183292/chinas-belt-and-road-plan-isnt-marshall-plan>

14- James Kyngé, China's Belt and Road projects drive overseas debt fears, Financial Times, 8 August 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/e7a08b54-9554-11e8-b747-fb1e803ee64e>

15- *Ibid.* Kynges, China's Belt and Road projects drive overseas debt fears.

16- Simon Mundy-Male and Kathrin Hille, Maldives seeks to renegotiate with China over Belt and Road debt, Financial Times, 1 February 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/fcab0410-2461-11e9-8ce6-5db4543da632>

has come under criticism in China for the extent of its exposure to Venezuela. The Export-Import Bank of China, which had a smaller portfolio, has been in contact for some time with the Venezuelan opposition, in the hope of maintaining its rights as a creditor.¹⁷

“Chinese leaders definitely have picked up the message. You cannot go on and on putting money in, without taking a review of what’s going on, to rebalance... China is fully aware of debt sustainability in spite of the critical comments by some people,” said Jin Liqun, president of the Beijing-based multilateral Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) that offers China an alternative lending model.¹⁸

Rewriting Civilizational Notions

To conceptualize its geopolitical ambitions, China has rooted its Belt and Road in the concepts of a 19th century American naval historian and a British geographer. China’s maritime Silk Road and string of pearls, a phrase coined by defence consultancy Booz Allen Hamilton in 2004 in a report to US secretary of defense Donald H. Rumsfeld,¹⁹ consists of ports that dot the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea through which half of the world’s maritime trade in petroleum transits. It amounts to a modern-day application of a notion articulated by Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, widely recognized as the late 19th century father of sea-power theory, that a world power needs overseas access to raw materials and markets to expand its production beyond its consumption and sustain its dominance.²⁰

A decade later, Sir Halford J. Mackinder, head of the London School of Economics (LSE), embraced the concept of Eurasia in a seminal article published by Britain’s Royal Geographic Society in 1904 at a time that the 9,200 kilometre-Trans-Siberian Railway was being built from Moscow to Vladivostok. Mackinder argued that it would be sea lanes as well as rail that would unite Europe and Asia as one landmass that he dubbed “the world island.” Describing Eurasia as “the continuous landmass of Euro-Asia” that “between the ocean and the desert measures 21,000,000 square miles, or half of all on the land on the globe,” Mackinder went on to say that “the real divide between east and west is to be found in the Atlantic ocean.”²¹

17- Henry Foy, Jonathan Wheatley and Lucy Hornby, Venezuela’s political turmoil sparks investor fears, *Financial Times*, 29 January 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/0d4b54be-1fc1-11e9-b126-46fc3ad87c65>

18- Lucy Hornby, China ‘rebalances’ overseas lending on debt burden concerns, *Financial Times*, 29 January 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/c0c3b840-238d-11e9-8ce6-5db4543da632> S

19- Julie A MacDonald, Amy Donahue and Bethany Danyluk, *Energy Futures in Asia – Final Report*, Washington DC: Booz Allen Hamilton, 2004.

20- Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*, Seattle: Amazon Digital Services LLC, 2011, Kindle edition.

21- H J. Mackinder, *The Geographical Pivot of History*, *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 170:4, p. 298-321, https://www.iwp.edu/docLib/20131016_MackinderTheGeographicalJournal.pdf

Mackinder's strategic view was grounded in a rewriting of the then prevalent civilizational notion that "the only history that counts is that of the Mediterranean and European races." Instead, Mackinder, citing a history of Asian invasions dating from Turanian nomads in the fifth century to the Mongols in the fifteenth and the Ottomans in the sixteenth century, urged his readers "to look upon Europe and European history as subordinate to Asia and Asiatic history for European civilization is, in a very real sense, the outcome of the secular struggle against Asiatic invasion."²²

Mackinder argued that the strategic focus in Eurasia was no longer exclusively land power and needed to include sea power. He envisioned Russia in alliance with another land power like Germany controlling Eurasia's sprawling "heartland" to allow "the use of vast continental resources for fleet-building, and the empire of the world would be in sight." In a book published at the end of World War One, Mackinder asserted that "who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; Who rules the World-Island commands the World."²³ Prophetically, Mackinder warned that China could eventually threaten the global balance of power by organizing the resources of Eurasia and building an invincible sea power. In an era that predated air, space and cyber power, Mackinder asked: "What if ... the whole World-Island or a large part of it, were at some future time to become a single and united base of sea-power? Would not the other insular bases be outbuilt as regards ships and outmanned as regards seamen? Their fleets would no doubt fight with all the heroism begotten of their histories, but the end would be fated."²⁴

Mackinder's notion of the Atlantic as a rupturing rather than a unifying factor rings no truer than today as is his focus on sea lanes with ports constituting major pawns in the Great Game. "For the first time since the end of World War II, the so-called declinists may be onto something fundamental when they argue that the West's heyday may be a thing of the past. The problem is not the economy or technology, but the centrifugal forces rising within the Transatlantic alliance: in short, the progressive civilizational fracturing and decomposition, fed by the growing disconnect between political and cultural elites and the publics across the two continents... The problem runs deeper than individual leaders or governments. We are at an ideological inflection point within the Transatlantic community because of trends that have been building up over decades. Both in the United States and in Europe,

22- *Ibid.* Mackinder, *The Geographical Pivot of History*.

23- H J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality, A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*, Washington DC: National University Press, Undated, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/139619/1942_democratic_ideals_reality.pdf

24- *Ibid.* Mackinder, *The Geographical Pivot of History*.

we are now subject to the added stress of a ‘take no prisoners’ politics in which the goal is not so much to win the argument as to annihilate one’s opponent.... Today the very bedrock of the Western political tradition is under assault. In addition, for at least three decades immigration policies across the West have shifted away from acculturating newcomers to the now regnant multiculturalist ideology, which has resulted in unintegrated “suspended communities,” said international relations scholar Andrew A. Michta.²⁵

In the process, in a growing number of democracies the larger national identity, which was historically tied to the overarching Western heritage, has been subsumed under ethnic and religious group identities. “We are not quite there yet, but once the sense of belonging to a larger shared Western cultural community has been abolished, we will have reached the tipping point... The cultural unmooring of the West that is now well underway is the result of more than a misguided immigration policy; rather, it flows from the larger ideological transformation of America and Europe... Suffice it to say that members of the rising generation increasingly see democracy as either so abstract a concept that it seems to have little direct connection to their experiences or as obstacle to the necessary wholesale transformation, or even abolition, of our obsolescent political systems... The last time the United States and Europe shared a broad consensus of principal strategic objectives—the “for what” of state power—was during the Cold War, when the imperative to maintain the grand anti-Soviet coalition provided the glue that held the West together. Today NATO and the European Union, which for decades have served as our principal security and economic frameworks, are at risk of becoming hollowed-out shells. NATO is struggling on multiple levels—from the point of view of resources, capabilities, and, most importantly, its ability to marshal the political will of the alliance to act in solidarity in a crisis,” Michta said. “The US military for all its \$700+ billion annual budget has been singularly unsuccessful in fighting and winning wars in Asia. Mackinder’s Heartland and the Asia mainland remain largely unaffected by US military action in any strategic sense,” added Philip G. Andrew, an independent Russia scholar.²⁶

A Non-convergence of Interests

Zbigniew Brzezinski, one of America’s greatest 20th century strategists who advised US presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Jimmy Carter, anticipated the trans-Atlantic divergence of interests when he warned as far back as 1997 that long-term US interests would be most threatened by a “grand coalition” of China and Russia

25- Andrew A. Michta, *The Sources of the West’s Decline*, *The American Interest*, 22 February 2019, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2019/02/22/the-sources-of-the-west-s-decline/>

26- Text message exchange with the author, 22 May 2019.

“united not by ideology but by complimentary grievances.”²⁷ Few in the United States took notice at the time. Two decades later, Brzezinski looks like a visionary with his predictions being confirmed by the US intelligence community.

“China and Russia will present a wide variety of economic, political, counterintelligence, military, and diplomatic challenges to the United States and its allies. We anticipate that they will collaborate to counter US objectives, taking advantage of rising doubts in some places about the liberal democratic model,” said Director of National Intelligence Daniel R. Coats in the intelligence community’s 2019 Worldwide Threat Assessment report to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. The report went on to say that China and Russia were “expanding cooperation with each other and through international bodies to shape global rules and standards to their benefit and present a counterweight to the United States and other Western countries.”²⁸

Addressing the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, then US defense secretary Jim Mattis downplayed Brzezinski’s fears, arguing that China and Russia were “united not by ideology but by complimentary grievances.” China and Russia have a “natural non-convergence of interests” despite the fact that both countries have defined their relationship as a “comprehensive strategic partnership,” Mattis reasoned. “There may be short-term convergence in the event they want to contradict international tribunals or try muscling their way into certain circumstances but my view -- I would not be wasting my time going to Beijing...if I really thought that’s the only option between us and China. What would be the point of it? I’ve got more important things to do,” Mattis argued. Mr. Mattis predicted that in the longer term “China has more in common with Pacific Ocean nations and the United States and India than they have in common with Russia.”

Mattis’ prediction of a US-China-India entente may seem even further away today than it did in Singapore a year ago, but his doubts about the sustainability of the Chinese-Russian alliance are being echoed by Chinese and Russian analysts and developments on the ground. Shi Ze, a former Chinese diplomat in Moscow who is now a senior fellow at the China Institute of International Studies, a think tank affiliated with the country’s foreign ministry, appeared to echo Mattis’ scepticism. “China and Russia have different attitudes. Russia wants to break the current international order. Russia thinks it is the victim of the current international system,

27- Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard, American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, New York: Basic Books, 1997, p. 55.

28- Daniel R. Coats, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community report to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 29 January 2019, https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR---SSCI.pdf?utm_source=Gov%20Delivery%20Email&utm_medium=Email&utm_c

in which its economy and its society do not develop. But China benefits from the current international system. We want to improve and modify it, not to break it,” Shi said.²⁹

The truth is that the jury is out. There is no shortage of evidence that China and Russia are joining forces in multiple theatres across the globe as well as in multi-lateral organizations like the United Nations and in Russian and Chinese efforts to drive wedges among Western allies³⁰ and undermine public confidence in democratic institutions.³¹

Yet, increasingly dependent on China for capital, technology, and market opportunities amid growing friction in its relationship with the United States, Russia is determined not to be relegated to playing second fiddle to the People’s Republic. The question is how disruptive Chinese-Russian rivalry in Central Asia and mounting Russian public unease with Chinese advances will be and whether that could alter US perceptions of Russia as an enemy rather than an ally. The odds may well be that China and Russia will prove to be long-term US rivals. However, it may just as well be that their alliance will prove to be more tactical than strategic with the China-Russia relationship resembling US-Chinese ties: co operation in an environment of divergence rather than convergence.

Facts on the ground tell a story seemingly aligned with Brzezinski’s vision and the intelligence community’s endorsement. It is Chinese-funded rail links connecting China to the Atlantic coast of Europe coupled with the People’s Republic’s string of pearls, ports stretching from the China Sea along the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea into the Mediterranean, that are helping cement the rise of Eurasia. Critics charge that the rail and sea links constitute a Chinese effort to undermine the security and economic architecture of the international order in a bid to counter American influence. The belief that the driver of the Belt and Road is geopolitics rather than economics is bolstered by predictions that none of China’s Indian Ocean port projects have much hope of immediate financial success.³² In Europe’s case, the

29- Yaroslav Trofimov, The new Beijing-Moscow Axis, *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 February 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-new-beijing-moscow-axis-11549036661>

30- Michael Peel and Mehreen Khan, China drives a belt and road through Europe, *Financial Times*, 8 March 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/37adb824-4126-11e9-9bee-efab61506f44>

31- Anne Applebaum, Russia is cultivating Germany’s far right. Germans don’t seem to care, *The Washington Post*, 12 April 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/russia-is-cultivating-germanys-far-right-germans-dont-seem-to-care/2019/04/12/ffa7b652-5d52-11e9-842d-7d3ed7eb3957_story.html?utm_term=.1c416968f5bf

32- Matthew Funaiolo and Jonathan Hillman, China’s Maritime Silk Road Initiative, *Economic Drivers and Challenges*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2018, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180717_FunaioloHillman_ChinaMaritimeSilkRoad.pdf?kdf7YyYgl03PljV8PHzZsiZt3_UxnBPo

perception is also being cemented by the fact that, in the words of analyst Galip Dalay, Europe and the Middle East, a region populated by autocracies that see China as a model of economic liberalization enabled by repressive authoritarian rule will shape each other.

“The contemporary Middle East is no longer the geopolitically US-centric space that the Europeans once knew. Europe can respond in several ways: proceed with its largely ad-hoc, incoherent and crisis-driven policies of recent years; continue to be incorporated into someone else’s game plan, as with the French-German involvement in the Russian-led Astana process for Syria; or craft a more coherent policy towards the region, with a strong emphasis on democratisation, reform, good governance, inclusion and reconciliation... If Europe doesn’t engage and invest in the transformation of the Middle East, regional developments will dramatically transform it, whether through radicalism, refugees, terrorism, xenophobia or populism. Interactions between Europe and the Middle East will be transformative, for better or for worse,” Dalay said.³³

As a result, some analysts suggest that the core of the global rebalancing of power and the shaping of a new world war is far more than a game. Strategist Robert D. Kaplan argues that the coming decades will be dominated by what he terms a cold war between the United States and China. The “future has arrived, and it is nothing less than a new cold war: The constant, interminable Chinese computer hacks of American warships’ maintenance records, Pentagon personnel records, and so forth constitute war by other means. This situation will last decades and will only get worse, whatever this or that trade deal is struck between smiling Chinese and American presidents in a photo-op that sends financial markets momentarily skyward. The new cold war is permanent because of a host of factors... a cold war between the (United States and China) is becoming the negative organizing principle of geopolitics that markets will just have to price in,” Kaplan said.³⁴

Robert Malley, a former Obama National Security Council official and head of the International Crisis Group noted that autocratic and authoritarian leaders were testing the limits of the Great Game as the power of Western nations erodes and embattled concepts of multilateralism no longer constrain them.

“As the era of largely uncontested U.S. primacy fades, the international order has

33- Galip Dalay, Europe must develop a Middle East policy independent of the US, Middle East Eye, 21 January 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/why-europe-must-engage-transformation-middle-east-748112364>

34- Robert D. Kaplan, A New Cold War has Begun, Foreign Policy, 7 January 2019, <https://foreign-policy.com/2019/01/07/a-new-cold-war-has-begun/>

been thrown into turmoil. More leaders are tempted more often to test limits, jostle for power, and seek to bolster their influence—or diminish that of their rivals—by meddling in foreign conflicts... Having annexed parts of Georgia and Crimea and stoked separatist violence in Ukraine’s Donbass region, Russia is now throwing its weight around in the Sea of Azov, poisoning dissidents in the United Kingdom, and subverting Western democracies with cyberwarfare. China obstructs freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and arbitrarily detains Canadian citizens—including the International Crisis Group’s Michael Kovrig. Saudi Arabia has pushed the envelope with the war in Yemen, the kidnapping of a Lebanese prime minister, and the gruesome murder of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in its consulate in Istanbul. Iran plots attacks against dissidents on European soil. Israel feels emboldened to undermine ever more systematically the foundations of a possible two-state solution,” Malley said.³⁵ Kovrig was detained in December 2018 after Canadian police arrested at the behest of the United States Huawei Technologies Co’s chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou on charges of having violated US sanctions against Iran.

Anti-Chinese Sentiment

Predicting how the Great Game will end is complicated by volatility, instability and uncertainty that has sparked violence and widespread discontent across a swath of land that stretches from the Mediterranean into the deep recesses of Asia. The violence and discontent complicate China’s grandiose plans for infrastructure and economic zones designed to tie Eurasia to the People’s Republic, threaten Russian aspirations to position itself as a global rather than a regional power, and scares off risk-adverse investors.

Wracked by internal political and economic problems, Europe may not have the wherewithal for geopolitical battle. Yet, despite a weak hand, it could come out on top in the play for energy dominance. US backing of India in the Great Game and efforts to drive wedges into mostly opportunistic alliances such as cooperation between China and Russia and Russia and Iran could help Europe compensate for its weakness.

Like in Central Asia, public sentiment in Russia east of the Urals is critical of perceived Chinese encroachment on the region’s natural resources including water, particularly in the Trans-Baikal region, as the two countries grow closer. Protests against Chinese investment projects and a refusal by some local officials in Siberia and the Russian Far East are as much directed at Beijing as they are against the

35- Robert Malley, 10 Conflicts to Watch in 2019, Foreign Policy, 28 December 2018, <https://foreign-policy.com/2018/12/28/10-conflicts-to-watch-in-2019-yemen-syria-afghanistan-south-sudan-venezuela-ukraine-nigeria-cameroon-iran-israel-saudi-arabia-united-states-china-kurds-ypg/>

perceived corruption of Russian federal government representatives and businessmen associated with them. Much like elsewhere along the Belt-and-Road, Russians resent China's import of higher-paid Chinese labour and Chinese goods and the emergence of Chinese neighbourhoods where street signs are in Chinese rather than Cyrillic.³⁶ A petition initiated in early 2019 by prominent Russian show business personalities opposing Chinese plans to build a water bottling plant on the shores of Lake Baikal attracted more than 800,000 signatures, signalling the depth of popular resentment and pitfalls of the Russian alliance with China.³⁷

Protests have further erupted in multiple Russian cities against Chinese logging in the country's Far East that residents and environmentalists charge has spoilt Russian watersheds and is destroying the habitats of the endangered Siberian tiger and Amur leopard.³⁸ The protesters, who denounced construction of housing for Chinese workers³⁹, are demanding a ban on Russian timber exports to China.⁴⁰ Like in Central Asia, anti-Chinese sentiment jelled with growing anger as result of Russia's deteriorating economy in which the income gap has increased exponentially while purchasing power dropped by 13 percent since 2013.⁴¹

Anti-Chinese sentiment is also fuelled by the lopsided nature of economic relations that Russia scholar Leo Aaron says fits the definition of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin of colonial trade, in which one country becomes a raw material appendage of another. "China is Russia's second-largest trading partner (after the EU) and Russia's largest individual partner in both exports and imports, for China the Russian market is at best second-rate. Russia ranks tenth in Chinese exports and does not make it into the top ten in either imports or total trade," Aaron said. He noted that three-quarters of Russia's exports to China were raw materials as opposed to consumer good, electronics and machinery accounted for the bulk of Chinese sales to

36- Paul Goble, Russian Elite Profiteering Enables Growing Chinese Control of Baikal Region, Eurasia Daily Monitor, 5 March 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-elite-profiteering-enables-growing-chinese-control-of-baikal-region/>

37- Paul Goble, Nearly a Million Russians have Signed a Petition Against Chinese Involvement in Lake Baikal, Window on Eurasia, 7 March 2019, <https://windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/2019/03/nearly-million-russians-have-signed.html>

38- Stephen Lee Myers, China's Voracious Appetite for Timber Stokes Fury in Russia and Beyond, The New York Times, 19 April 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/09/world/asia/chinas-voracious-appetite-for-timber-stokes-fury-in-russia-and-beyond.html>

39- Deutsche Welle, Siberia: Anti-Chinese protests, 1 April 2019, <https://www.dw.com/cda/en/siberia-anti-chinese-protests/av-48110739>

40- Vita Spivak, The Bugbear of Chinese Deforestation: The Real Threat to Russia's Forests, Carnegie Moscow Center, 10 September 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77200>

41- Henry Foy, Russians Squeezed by Fall in Buying Power, Financial Times, 15 April 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/41d79fe6-5a75-11e9-9dde-7aedca0a081a>

Russia.⁴² Fuelling anger in the Far East is the fact that Chinese investment, with the exception of the bottling plant and a free port in Vladivostok has largely ignored the region because of its lack of infrastructure, red tape and small population.

Chinese investment in Russia moreover was a fraction of China's investment in regions like sub-Saharan Africa or South America and less than China's expanding stake in countries like Nigeria and Brazil. A Chinese-Russian agreement on economic cooperation in Siberia, Russia's Far East and China's Northeast for a period of nine years ending in 2018 fell far short of expectations. The agreement identified 91 joint investment projects of which only 11 materialized.⁴³ Similarly, energy failed to live up to its billing. CEFC China Energy's plan to acquire a 14 percent stake in Russia's largest, and majority state-owned, oil company, Rosneft, never happened. Neither did an agreed US\$25 billion investment in Russia's Power of Siberia gas pipeline. The pipeline's export of 38 billion of cubic metres of natural gas is but one source for China that in 2017 imported more than 90 billion cubic meters from Australia, Qatar, and Turkmenistan.

Russian fears of Chinese encroachment are rooted in hundreds of years of intermittent clashes along the Amur river that separates China from the Russian Far East. In the 1800s, Chinese migration to the Russian Far East sparked warnings of the 'yellow peril.' Russian author Nikolai Dmitrievich Obleukhov writing under the pen name P. Ukhtubuzhsky predicted in 1911 that "Russians are being displaced by the yellow races who seize commerce, industry, wages, and so on... God guides people. Those nations who protect Good and Truth will be victorious. If Russia, carrying the light of Orthodoxy, faces in Asia the yellow races wallowing in the darkness of paganism, there cannot be any doubt as to the outcome of this struggle."⁴⁴

The fears prompted Joseph Stalin in the first half of the 20th century to deport the region's Korean and Chinese populations. When Russia and China finally settled a border dispute in 2008 with a transfer of land to China, Russian media raised the spectre of millions of Chinese migrants colonizing Siberia and the Far East. The land transfer may be one reason why China, the target of Russian expansionism in the 19th century, appears to be less driven in its relationship with Russia by its sense of entitlement.

42- Leon Aaron, Are Russia and China Really Forming an Alliance? Foreign Affairs, 4 April 2019, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-04-04/are-russia-and-china-really-forming-alliance?utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter_cta&utm_campaign=cta_share_buttons

43- Ivan Zuyenko, A Chinese-Russian Regional Program Ends With a Whimper, Carnegie Moscow Center, 26 September 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77341>

44- Viktor Dyatlov, Chinese Migrants and Anti-Chinese Sentiments in Russian Society in Franck Billé, Grégory Delaplace and Caroline Humphrey (ed.), *Frontier Encounters, Knowledge and Practice at the Russian, Chinese and Mongolian Border*, Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015, p. 71-87.

Popular Russian fears diverge from official thinking that in recent years has discounted the threat of Chinese encroachment given that the trend is for Russians to seek opportunity in China where wages are higher, a far cry from the 1990s and 2000s when Chinese shuttle traders dominated local markets in the Russian Far East.⁴⁵ Russians no longer speak of the yellow peril, but Obleukhov's themes of Chinese depriving Russian of jobs, stealing Russia's natural resources and diverting capital persist.

Adding fuel to the fire, scholar Dmitry Zhelobov warned in an interview widely read in Russia that China was gradually establishing military bases in Central Asia to ensure that neither Russia nor the United States would be able to disrupt Chinese trade with the Middle East and Europe across the Eurasian heartland. Zhelobov positioned his remarks as a warning to Central Asian nations and a wake-up call for Moscow not to view China exclusively as an ally. Zhebolov predicted that on the back of massive railway, highway and pipeline investments China was likely to have a military presence within the next five years.⁴⁶ "Moscow has given remarkably little consideration to the possibility that China will build on its soft power in Central Asia to establish security relationships or even bases and thus accelerate the decline of Russian influence there," assed Eurasia scholar Paul Goble.⁴⁷

Increased Chinese military interest stems from the fact that Central Asia is a key buffer between Xinjiang and a Middle East wracked by conflict and volatile political transitions. It also results from concern that Russia's military engagement in Syria may be stretching its forces thin. Establishment of Chinese bases would however potentially challenge a Russian-Chinese arrangement that envisioned China expanding economically in Central Asia without threatening Russian military and security dominance of the region. Signs of China's increased security interest are undeniable. China is reportedly building a military base on the Tajik–Afghan border.⁴⁸ It has quietly increased security assistance to Kyrgyzstan⁴⁹ after

45- Maria Repnikova and Alexander Gabuev, Why forecasts of a Chinese takeover of the Russian Far East are just dramatic myth, South China Morning Post, 14 July 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2102324/why-forecasts-chinese-takeover-russian-far-east-are-just>

46- Eugenia Kim, Chinese military bases appear in Turkestan within five years – opinion (Военные базы Китая появятся в Туркестане в течение пяти лет — мнение), 28 March 2019, https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2600955.html?mc_cid=93a7d2ffdb&mc_eid=6149eed97d S

47- Paul Goble, China Will Have Military Bases in Central Asia Within Five Years, Russian Expert, The Jamestown Foundation, 4 March 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/china-will-have-military-bases-in-central-asia-within-five-years-russian-expert-says/>

48- Catherine Putz, Why Would China Help Build an Afghan Military Base in Badakhshan? The Diplomat, 5 January 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/why-would-china-help-build-an-afghan-military-base-in-badakhshan/>

49- Bruce Pannier, A New Chinese Interest In Central Asian Security, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 30 March 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-central-asia-security-uyghurs-russia/28400327.html>

the 2016 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Bishkek⁵⁰ and is selling weapons to Turkmenistan.⁵¹

Diverging Chinese Russian interests in post-Soviet Eurasia predate Beijing's increased security concerns. China refrained from recognizing Russian-inspired declarations of independence in 2008 of two regions of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. China abstained instead of vetoing a 2014 UN Security Council resolution that condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea. And, adding insult to injury, Xi opted to unveil China's Belt and Road initiative in the Kazakh capital of Astana rather than Moscow. By doing so, Xi relegated Russia to the status of second fiddle.

Zhelobov and Goble's warnings may be gaining currency in Moscow. Russian security services blocked plans to buy data storage and servers from Chinese telecom giant Huawei because they feared that the infrastructure would grant China access to sensitive Russian information.⁵² Similarly, Chinese dependence on Russian military technology is diminishing, potentially threatening a key export market. China in 2017 rolled out its fifth generation Chengdu J-20 fighter that is believed to be technologically superior to Russia SU-57E.⁵³ Accounting for 35 percent of arms sales, India has emerged as Russia's main export market with China down the pecking order at 12 percent.⁵⁴

Putin signalled greater awareness of shifting sands in Central Asia by signing an agreement in March 2019 during a visit to Kyrgyzstan to expand the Kant Air Base 20 kilometres east of the capital Bishkek that is used by the Russian Air Force by 60 hectares and increase the rent Russia pays.⁵⁵ China was but one factor in the changing landscape; a likely US withdrawal from Afghanistan and reduced Central Asian dependency on Russia as a result of declines in labour migration were

50- Tom Phillips, Suicide bomber attacks Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan, *The Guardian*, 30 August 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/30/bomb-attack-chinese-embassy-kyrgyzstan-bishkek>

51- Defence Blog, New Chinese-built MANPADS has entered service with Turkmenistan Army, 16 June 2018, <https://defence-blog.com/army/new-chinese-built-manpads-has-entered-service-with-turkmenistan-army.html>

52- Andrei Soldatov, Putin Tightens his Grip on Russia's Internet – with China's Help, German Council on Foreign Relations, DGAP No. 3, March 2019, <https://dgap.org/en/think-tank/publications/dgap-analyse-compact/security-first-technology-second>

53- Abraham Ait, Does Russian Military Aviation Have Anything Left to Offer China?, *The Diplomat*, 5 April 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/04/does-russian-military-aviation-have-anything-left-to-offer-china/>

54- Pieter D. Wezeman, Aude Fleurant, Alexandra Kuimova, Nan Tian and Siemon T. Wezeman, *Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2017*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2018, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-03/fssipri_at2017_0.pdf

55- Regnum News Agency, Russia will pay Kyrgyzstan about \$ 4.8 million for use of a military base, 28 March 2019, <https://regnum.ru/news/2600413.html>

the others. “With the demise of Russia as a magnet for immigrants, Moscow has lost much of its attraction as a political centre, reducing still further any chance of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s dream of imperial restoration,” said Eurasia scholar Goble.⁵⁶

In an effort not to be boxed into a purely military role, Putin, despite lacking China’s financial muscle, further lavished his Kyrgyz hosts with US\$6 billion in deals ranging from power, mineral resources and hydrocarbons to industry and agriculture.⁵⁷ Putin moreover allocated US\$200 million for the upgrading of customs infrastructure and border equipment to put an end to the back-up of dozens of trucks on the Kazakh-Kyrgyz border because Kyrgyzstan has so far been unable to comply with the technical requirements of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

Kyrgyzstan may also emerge as a focal point in Russian-Chinese competition for influence in Central Asia as a result not only of suspicion of Chinese intent but also because it is a flashpoint of the at times misalignment of interests between China’s Belt and Road and participating countries. China backed by Uzbekistan sees Kyrgyzstan as a node on its overland route to Europe that would require a rail link traversing the country from east to west. Kyrgyzstan sees a more immediate need for a north south link that would connect its Chui valley to the Fergana valley in the north that is home to an ethnic Uzbek minority and an Islamist stronghold. China’s lack of interest in a north-south link that in Kyrgyz eyes would significantly increase their country’s connectivity has fuelled anti-Chinese sentiment.

Some are Better Positioned Than Others

Similarly, Iranian scholar Hamidreza Azizi argues that Russian efforts to have a significant stake of sectors of the Central Asian economy, including energy and transportation, ultimately will put Russia and Iran at odds in their competition to be the key nodes in links to Europe.⁵⁸ Alex Vatanka, another Iran expert, notes that clouds have hung over the Russian-Iranian relationship since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The fragility of what both countries described as strategic relations was evident when in 1999 Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin promised

56- Paul Goble, *Immigration Collapse Undermines Kremlin Hopes to Recover Russia’s Dominance in Former Soviet Space*, The Jamestown Foundation, 3 May 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/immigration-collapse-undermines-kremlin-hopes-to-recover-russias-dominance-in-former-soviet-space/>

57- Eurasianet, *Kyrgyzstan: Putin visit brings lavish deals and vows of a bright future*, 29 March 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-putin-visit-brings-lavish-deals-and-vows-of-a-bright-future>

58- Hamidreza Azizi, *Cooperation between Iran and Russia in Central Asia: Possibilities and Constraints*, Russian Council on International Affairs, 2016, https://www.academia.edu/30653304/Cooperation_between_Iran_and_Russia_in_Central_Asia_Possibilities_and_Constraints

US Vice-President Al Gore to halt military sales to Russia.⁵⁹ Subsequent Russian feet dragging in the first decade of the 21st century on the completion of a nuclear power reactor and sale of an anti-air missile system as well as Russian support for United Nations sanctions demonstrated to Iran Russia's willingness to use the Islamic republic as a bargaining chip in its relations with the United States. "The Russians are not strategic friends of Iran. They largely pursue political goals that give them maximum benefit in international relations," Iranian member of parliament Hashmatullah Fahlatpishhe said at the time.⁶⁰

Persistent Iranian distrust has not stopped Tehran, whose revolution was civilizational, from increasingly narrowing differences with Russia as the two countries' interests converged on issues like Syria, their disdain for Western liberalism, advocacy of a multi-polar world order that recognizes them as important players, and desire to control cyberspace and redefine international concepts of human rights. The convergence has not allayed Iranian fears that Russia's advantage of being able to talk to all parties involved in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East, a majority with which Iran has no contact, could lead to its fair-weather friend throwing it under the bus as it did prior to the nuclear agreement. As a result, Iran monitors Russian relations with the United States, Israel and the Gulf states with Argus eyes. "Russia will never sacrifice itself for Iran and it will make a decision based on its own interests," warned former Iranian diplomat Fereidoun Majlesi.⁶¹

For its part, India has put flesh on the skeleton of its Connect Central Asia strategy announced in 2012, a year before Chinese president Xi Jinping first articulated his Belt and Road initiative with the inauguration of the Indian-backed Iranian deep-sea port of Chabahar. Both leaders significantly announced their policies in Central Asia, Xi Jinping in the Kazakh capital of Astana and then Indian minister Shri E. Ahamed in Kyrgyzstan's Bishkek. Indian prime minister Narendra Modi has become the first Indian leader to visit all five former Soviet Central Asian republics since Jawaharlal Nehru in the 1960s.

"There is scope for other connectivity initiatives in the region, complementing each other in providing the promise of more efficient transit of goods between India and Central Asia. India believes that connectivity initiatives must be based on universally recognized international norms, good governance, rule of law, openness,

59- Alex Vatanka, *Iran's Russian Conundrum* in Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank (eds.), *Russia in the Middle East*, Washington DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2018, p. 88.

60- Tabnak, No country has harmed Iran like Russia 30 (هیچ کشوری مثل روسیه به ایران ظلم نکرده), May 2010, <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/101428/> هیچ کشوری-مثل-روسیه-به-ایران-ظلم-نکرده

61- Rohollah Faghihi, *Russia wants Iran out of Syria. Iranians aren't so happy about that*, Middle East Eye, 29 May 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-wants-iran-out-syria-iranians-arent-so-happy-about-1850822925>

transparency, and equality. They must follow principles of financial responsibility and must be pursued in a manner that respects sovereignty and territorial integrity,” Indian foreign minister Sushma Swaraj told a meeting of the India-Central Asia Dialogue in the historic Uzbek city of Samarkand in early 2019 in what amounted to a snide against China.⁶²

Asian players may conceptually and bureaucratically be better positioned in approaching Europe and Asia as one political, albeit polarized and disorganized entity populated by widely differing and competing visions. The positioning was evident in the diametrically opposed narratives that dominated in East and West since the fall of the Berlin Wall. “Western narratives of the post-Cold War era focus on crises and milestones, such as the Yugoslav wars, NATO expansion, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the Arab Spring. From the Asian point of view, the past three decades look very different – they have been characterized predominantly by an Eastern trade revolution that has connected Eurasian and Indian Ocean spaces,” said geopolitics scholar Parag Khanna.⁶³

US Naval College national security scholar Nikolas K. Gvosdev argues that the United States is blinded by the State Department’s classification of Russia as part of Europe. State further lumps Central Asia together with Pakistan and India while the Pentagon associates it with the Arab world and Iran.⁶⁴

“The continued inclusion of Russia within the diplomatic confines of a larger European bureau has intellectually limited assessments about Russia’s position in the world by framing Russian action primarily through a European lens. Not only does this undercount Russia’s ability to be a major player in the Middle East, South Asia and East Asia, it has also, in my view, tended to overweight the importance of the Baltic littoral to Russian policy,” Gvosdev said. He warned that the US government’s narrow geographical classification of Russia and Central Asia, Eurasia’s heartland has “relegated it to second-tier status in terms of U.S. attention and priorities.” The classification reflects the failure of the US foreign policy community to engage with what former Portuguese Europe minister Bruno Macias envisions as a divergence of US and European interests as Europe and Asia fuse into one

62- M Reyaz, India Finally Appears Serious About Central Asia, Making Uzbekistan Its Gateway To The Region, India Times, 17 January 2019, <https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-finally-appears-serious-about-central-asia-making-uzbekistan-its-gateway-to-the-region-360556.html>

63- Parag Khanna, Washington Is Dismissing China’s Belt and Road. That’s a Huge Strategic Mistake, Politico, 30 April 2019, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/04/30/washington-is-dismissing-chinas-belt-and-road-thats-a-huge-strategic-mistake-226759/>

64- Nikolas K. Gvosdev. Warnings from Eurasia, The National Interest, 27 December 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/warnings-eurasia-39927>

supercontinent.⁶⁵

It also means that the Trump administration and significant segments of the foreign policy community underestimate the full impact of strategist Khanna's conclusion that "the United States' global influence today hinges on its relevance in Asia."⁶⁶ The failure was mirrored in the U.S. National Security Strategy⁶⁷ published in 2017 by the White House and an effort by Rand Corp., created immediately after World War II to provide research to the US armed force, in 2018 to conceptualize current geopolitics as an era of intensifying international competition. Rather than recognizing a divergence of interests, the study suggested that the United States will continue to have the opportunity, if it chooses, to lead a predominant coalition of value-sharing democracies and other largely status quo states to help preserve stability." The study further appeared to downplay any trans-Atlantic divergence by reducing differences to "identity-fuelled nationalism, to recapture their "rightful place" in world politics," a reference on the one hand to Russia, China, Iran and North Korea and on the other to Europe with its increasingly influential civilizational, nationalist, populist and far-rights forces⁶⁸ and the impact of highly emotive issues such as migration, political violence and religious identity emerging from West Asia.

The United States' struggle to come to grips with the fact that the world is moving from an era in which it was the sole super power for a quarter of a century to a multi-polar world in which its writ is being continuously challenged is laid bare in suggestions by prominent American intellectuals that it revert to Cold War tactics. Nominated by Foreign Policy as one of the world's top 100 thinkers, international relations scholar Michael Mandelbaum suggested that Cold War-like containment would be America's best response to "revisionist powers" such as China, Russia and Iran. "The contemporary world is similar enough to its mid-twentieth-century predecessor to make that old strategy relevant but different enough that it needs to be modified and updated. While success is not guaranteed, a new containment policy offers the best chance to defend American interests in the twenty-first century," Mandelbaum said. The scholar argued that US containment strategy would have to take into account economic interdependence between the world's powers. "Although a Chinese military collapse would enhance Asian security, a Chinese

65- Bruno Macias, *The Dawn of Eurasia: On the Trail of New World Order*, New York: Penguin Random House, 2018.

66- Parag Khanna, *The Future is Asian*, New York: Simon & Shuster, 2019, p. 67.

67- The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

68- Michael J. Mazarr, Janathan Blake, Abigail Casey, Tim McDonald, Stephanie Pezard and Michael Spiritas, *Understanding the Emerging Era of International Competition*, Rand Corporation, 2018, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2726.html

economic collapse would bring economic disaster,” he noted.⁶⁹

The United States’ seeming inability to conceptually approach Europe and Asia as an emerging continent was in part rooted in what Robert Kagan, a leading neo-conservative American historian and foreign-policy commentator, described as a long-standing American belief that unlike ideologies such as communism or political Islam, autocratic governments were about power and regime survival rather than a grand theory of what a society should look like. Summing up this view of autocracy, Kagan noted that “though hostile to democracy at home, (autocracies) did not care what happened beyond their borders. They might even evolve into democracies themselves, unlike the ‘totalitarian communist states. We even got used to regarding them as ‘friends,’ as strategic allies against the great radical challenges of the day: communism during the Cold War, Islamist extremism today. Like so many of the theories that became conventional wisdom during the late 20th and early 21st centuries, however, this one was mistaken. Today, authoritarianism has emerged as the greatest challenge facing the liberal democratic world — a profound ideological, as well as strategic, challenge.”⁷⁰

Underestimating at Your Peril

The US focus on Russia as a European rather than a regional power with global ambitions meant that it underestimated Moscow’s play in the Middle East despite its military intervention in Syria. Russia national security scholar Stephen Blank argues that President Vladimir Putin’s strategy in the region is rooted in the thinking of Yevgeny Primakov, a Middle East expert, linguist and former spymaster, foreign minister and deputy prime minister. Primakov saw the Middle East as a key arena for countering the United States that would enable Russia, weakened by the demise of the Soviet Union and a subsequent economic crisis, to regain its status as a global and regional power and ensure that it would be one pole in a multi-polar world.⁷¹ In identifying the region as a preferred battleground Russia benefitted in the words of historian Niall Ferguson from the fact that its significant oil reserves made it “the only power that has no vested interest in stability in the Middle East.”⁷²

“In order to reassert Russia’s greatness, Primakov and Putin aimed ultimately at strategic denial, denying Washington sole possession of a dominant role in the

69- Michael Mandelbaum, *The New Containment*, Foreign Affairs, March/April 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-02-12/new-containment>

70- Robert Kagan, *The strongmen strike back*, The Washington Post, 15 March 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/opinions/wp/2019/03/14/feature/the-strongmen-strike-back/>

71- Stephen Blank, *The Foundations of Russian Policy in the Middle East* in Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank (eds.), *Russia in the Middle East*, Washington DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2018, p. 29-30.

72- Gordon G. Chang, “How China and Russia Threaten the World,” *Commentary*, June 2007, p. 29.

Middle East from where US influence could expand to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS),” Blank said. Primakov and Putin believed that if Russia succeeded it would force the United States to concede multi-polarity and grant Russia the recognition it deserves. That, in turn, would allow Putin to demonstrate to the Russian elite his ability to restore great power status. Syria offered Russia the opportunity to display its military prowess without the United States challenging the move. At the same time, Russia leveraged its political economic clout to forge an alliance with Turkey and partner with Iran. The approach served to defang Turkish and Iranian influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia.⁷³

Similarly, Russia after brutally repressing religiously inspired Chechen rebels in the 1990s and despite the lingering memory of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, has proven to be far defter than either China or the United States at promoting politically pacifist or apolitical Islam in a complex game of playing both sides against the middle. Russian engagement runs the gamut from military intervention in Syria to engaging with militants⁷⁴ to cooperating with Muslim autocrats⁷⁵ to encouraging condemnation of activist strands of ultra-conservative Islam.⁷⁶

Barrel-chested Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov is Putin’s frontman in non-military aspects of the Russian effort. Widely seen as the Russian leader’s henchman, Kadyrov earned his credentials by brutally suppressing an Islamist insurgency in Chechnya during his decade-long tenure and contributing Chechen combatants to fight alongside Russian troops in Syria and separatists in Donbas.⁷⁷ Kadyrov has also cleverly aligned himself with like-minded Middle Eastern governments that not only stand out in their repression of dissent, but also their efforts to oppose Saudi-inspired ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim Islam.⁷⁸

Speaking to The Washington Post, Beslan Visambiev, a manager of a Grozny-based UAE investment fund, suggested noted that. “It seems like Putin delegated those

73- *Ibid.* Blank, The Foundations of Russian Policy in the Middle East.

74- James M. Dorsey, Syrian Civil War: Russia Forges Risky Ties with Islamists, RSIS Commentaries 100/2013, 27 May 2013, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/1990-syrian-civil-war-russia-forge/>

75- Hassan Hassan, Moscow’s Little-Noticed Islamic-Outreach Effort, The Atlantic, 5 January 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/01/russia-promotes-politically-pacifist-islam/579394/>

76- James M. Dorsey, Fighting for the Soul of Islam: A Battle of the Paymasters, RSIS Commentaries 24/2016, 30 September 2016, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co16241-fighting-for-the-soul-of-islam-a-battle-of-the-paymasters/>

77- Shaun Walker, ‘We like partisan warfare.’ Chechens fighting in Ukraine – on both sides, The Guardian, 24 July 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/24/chechens-fighting-in-ukraine-on-both-sides>

78- James M. Dorsey, UAE Vs. Saudi: Fighting for the Soul of Islam, The Globalist, 1 October 2016, <https://www.theglobalist.com/soul-of-islam-uae-saudi-arabia-religion-gulf-countries/>

powers to Kadyrov,” Visambiev said.⁷⁹ Visambiev was echoing Kadyrov who four years earlier told 20,000 members of his militia in a Grozny stadium that “the time has come for us to make our conscious choice, and we say this to the whole world that we are the combat infantry of Vladimir Putin.” Kadyrov was quoting a speech given by his father shortly before he was assassinated in 2004.⁸⁰ Denouncing criticism of his human rights record as a “myth” designed to destabilise his government.⁸¹

Kadyrov, like his Egyptian counterpart Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, has brutally targeted gays and arrested and/or killed his critics. Kadyrov was welcomed in 2018 like royalty in Saudi Arabia. Saudi authorities let him inside Prophet Mohammed’s room, which is closed to all but special guests. And even though Kadyrov is a follower of Sufism, which Saudi Salafis consider a deviant religious sect, he was allowed to perform and record Sufi rituals in the room. Kadyrov serves as living proof that Russia’s alliance with Shiite Iran in Syria and support for President Bashar al-Asad, who is an Alawite, a sect that is an offshoot of Shiism, does not make it an anti-Sunni Muslim power. “The Chechen military police in Syria is case in point. The Chechens are rebuilding the Grand Mosque in Aleppo as well, which may be seen as an attempt to be more appealing to Syria’s Sunni population,” said Yury Barman who focuses on Russian Middle East policy.⁸²

While the United States may be operating from an outdated paradigm that fails to take shifting geopolitical realities into account, China risks overestimating what it’s position will be once the Great Game has been played out. Khanna, the strategist, argues that the new world order has already been determined. “We are living – for the first time ever -- in a truly multipolar and multicivilizational order in which North America, Europe and Asia each represents a major share of power,” Khanna said.⁸³

Implicitly acknowledging Macias’ notion of a supercontinent, Khanna goes on to say that “ultimately, China’s position will be not of an Asian or global hegemon

79- Amie Ferris-Rotman, Chechnya’s leader uses World Cup to extend his outreach to Middle East, The Washington Post, 27 May 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/chechnyas-leader-uses-world-cup-to-extend-his-outreach-to-middle-east/2018/05/25/2050d7b6-5cfb-11e8-b656-236c6214ef01_story.html?utm_term=.e0d1cb2e5d34

80- Karim Zidan, How The Warlord Who Controls Chechnya Uses Sports To Rule, Deadspin, 19 July 2017, <https://deadspin.com/how-the-warlord-who-controls-chechnya-uses-sports-to-ru-1797065629>

81- Independent, Chechnya: Human rights abuse allegations a ‘myth to destabilise government’, claims Ramzan Kadyrov, 17 January 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/chechnya-ramzan-kadyrov-human-rights-abuse-allegations-myth-destabilise-government-russia-a8164241.html>

82- *Ibid.* Hassan, Moscow’s Little-Noticed Islamic-Outreach Effort.

83- *Ibid.* Khanna, p. 14.

but rather of the eastern anchor of the Asian – and Eurasian – mega system.”⁸⁴ Guo Xuetang, director of China’s state-run Institute of International Strategy and Policy Analysis in Shanghai appears to agree. China and Russia “share a strategic understanding on how to prevent US influence” in Eurasia,” Guo said. “China doesn’t want a two-front war, and neither does Russia. So China defends the east, and Russia defends the west.”⁸⁵ The two countries held their biggest ever joint war games in the fall of 2018 with 3,000 Chinese troops driving armoured columns in Siberia.

Russia scholar Alexander Gabuev argues that Russia and China are moreover increasingly bound by shared political interests. “Both regimes value stability, predictability, and the preservation of their hold on power above all else. And both countries, as permanent members of the UN Security Council, share a desire to shape the international order in a way that places sovereignty and limits on foreign interference in domestic affairs at its heart. This is visible in debates on various areas of global governance such as norms in cyberspace and control over the Internet, where Beijing and Moscow regularly support each other.”⁸⁶ Chinese and Russian perceptions of communality of interests was reinforced by US strategic thinking laid out in a US National Security Strategy document as well as the Pentagon’s Cyber Strategy that lumped China and Russia together in their definition of threats posed to the national security of the United States.⁸⁷

Increasing Russian reliance on its common interest with China has replaced distrust of Chinese intentions aided by China’s help in dampen the impact of Western sanctions imposed in response to Russia’s annexation of Crimea. A Russian inter-agency study of the risks of a closer alliance with Beijing suggested that Russia had less to fear than policymakers in Moscow had long assumed. Estimates of Chinese migration to the Russian Far East, raising the spectre of a Chinese takeover proved to be overblown.⁸⁸ Russia began to see China’s growing economic footprint in Central Asia, Russia’s soft underbelly, as a potential a blessing in disguise. It could create new opportunities for Central Asian nations as well as Russian exporters and allow them to ignore Western sanctions.

84- *Ibid.* Khanna, p. 20.

85- *Ibid.* Trofimov, The new Beijing-Moscow Axis.

86- Alexander Gabuev, Why Russia and China Are Strengthening Security Ties, Foreign Affairs, 24 September 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-09-24/why-russia-and-china-are-strengthening-security-ties?cid=int-fls&pgtype=hpg>

87- US Defence Department, Cyber Strategy, 2018, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Sep/18/2002041658/-1/-1/1/CYBER_STRATEGY_SUMMARY_FINAL.PDF

88- Maria Repnikova and Alexander Gabuev, South China Morning Post, 14 July 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2102324/why-forecasts-chinese-takeover-russian-far-east-are-just>

In theory, all looked good. Reality proved to be very different. Russian hopes that converting the Trans-Siberian Railway into a high-speed link that would connect St. Petersburg with the Far East and turn Russia into the transit hub for China's Eurasia trade proved financially unfeasible. Repeated attempts to persuade China Railway Eryuan Engineering Group (CREEC) to invest failed. The state-owned company definitively dashed Russian hopes in 2018, declaring that the "the high-speed rail through Russia will never pay off."⁸⁹ In a further setback, China simultaneously opted for an east-west road link through Kazakhstan after efforts to complete a Moscow-St. Petersburg highway as well as a ring road around the Russian capital and a Volga-Kazakhstan road stalled for years.⁹⁰ Infrastructure failure cast a long shadow over integrating the Russian-dominated EEU.

Unlike the United States that with Trump increasingly looked at the world in bilateral rather than multilateral terms, Central Asian nations embraced the notion that they existed in an integrated, interconnected region that could not isolate itself from changes enveloping it. That understanding was reflected in a report by the Astana Club⁹¹ that brings together prominent political figures, diplomats, and experts from the Great Game's various players under the auspices of Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev.

Entitled, 'Toward a Greater Eurasia: How to Build a Common Future?' the report warned that the Eurasian supercontinent needed to anticipate the Great Game's risks. The risks included mounting tensions between the United States and China; global trade wars; arms races; escalating conflict in the greater Middle East; deteriorating relations between Russia and the West; a heating up of contained European conflicts such as former Yugoslavia; rising chances of separatism and ethnic/religious conflict; and environmental degradation as well as technological advances.

The report suggested that the risks were enhanced by the fragility of the global system as a result of the weakening of multilateral institutions, escalating trade and cyber wars and ecological challenges. The risks frame the Great Game that is played not only in Eurasia but across the globe.⁹² Like Risk, it is a game that not

89- Vladislav Inozemtsev, Integrating the Eurasian Union and China's Belt and Road: A Bridge Too Far? Eurasia Daily Monitor Vo. 16:91, 21 June 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/integrating-the-eurasian-union-and-chinas-belt-and-road-a-bridge-too-far/>

90- Eurasian Development Bank, Eurasian development bank to allocate RUB 10 billion as senior creditor under Central Ring Road 3 construction project, 31 July 2017, <https://eabr.org/en/press/news/edb-to-allocate-rub-10-billion-as-senior-creditor-under-central-ring-road-3-construction-project/>

91- Astana Club, Toward a Greater Eurasia: How to Build a Common Future?, 2018, <https://astana-club.kz/#/2018/>

92- James M. Dorsey, Towards a New World Order in Eurasia? The Role of Russia and China, RSIS Commentaries, 22 December 2016, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co16310-towards-a-new-world-order-in-eurasia-the-role-of-russia-and-china/>

only aims to achieve dominance of infrastructure and energy, but also to reshape political systems at a time that liberal democracy is on the defensive and populism on the rise.

A Welcome Boon

Players like China and Russia benefit from the rise of populism, authoritarianism, and illiberal democracy. Russia, tacitly backed by China, has sought to harness the new winds by attempting to undermine trust in Western democratic structures, manipulate elections, and sew domestic discord in the West. Populism and the Trump administration's economic nationalism have, in a twist of irony, allowed China, led by a Communist party, to project itself as a champion of free trade and globalization.⁹³

Suggestions that Putin was bent on undermining Western democratic institutions were initially viewed as a crackpot conspiracy theory. Yet, the notion has gained significant currency against a backdrop of assertions that Russia is waging a cyber war against the West. The United States has accused Russia of interfering in its electoral process.⁹⁴ German intelligence has sounded alarm bells about Russian efforts to manipulate public opinion.⁹⁵ Putin couldn't suppress a smirk when French National Front leader Marie Le Pen visited him in 2017 weeks before French elections in which a Russian bank loan had helped fund her campaign.⁹⁶

East European leaders fear Russian bullying and encroachment.⁹⁷ Whether conspiracy theory or not, western intelligence agencies and analysts see a pattern in Russian moves that would also serve Chinese interests. That is particularly with the United States under Trump stepping back as a guarantor of the international order and de-emphasizing US promotion of democratic values and human rights. At the same time, Trump's perceived unpredictability has made China becomes more sen-

93- World Economic Forum, President Xi's speech to Davos in full, 17 January 2017, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/01/full-text-of-xi-jinping-keynote-at-the-world-economic-forum>

94- Luke Harding, What we know about Russia's interference in the US election, *The Guardian*, 16 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/16/qa-russian-hackers-vladimir-putin-donald-trump-us-presidential-election>

95- Natalie Nougayrède, Watch out, Europe. Germany is top of Russian hackers' list, *The Guardian*, 13 January 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/13/europe-germany-russian-hackers-bundestag-angela-merkel-election>

96- Shaun Walker and Kim Willsher, Putin tells Le Pen Russia has no plans to meddle in French election, *The Guardian*, 24 March 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/24/vladimir-putin-hosts-marine-le-pen-in-moscow>

97- James Kirchik, The Plot Against Europe, *Foreign Policy*, 6 March 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/06/the-plot-against-europe/> / Joe Parkinson and Georgi Kantchev, Document: Russia Uses Rigged Polls, Fake News to Sway Elections, *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 March 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-does-russia-meddle-in-elections-look-at-bulgaria-1490282352>

sitive to the ups and downs of American policies.

Undermining confidence in democratic structures legitimizes Russian and Chinese efforts to rebalance global geopolitical power arrangements. Suggestions that populism that thrives on a sense of crisis and xenophobic threat perceptions may have had only a brief heyday in various Western countries, including the United States, could complicate Russian and Chinese moves.⁹⁸

China and Russia are aided in their subversive efforts, whether it is digital warfare or cyber espionage, by the fact that relations between the United States and many of its allies are testy. Trump's apparent affinity to illiberal and authoritarian leaders like Turkish and Egyptian presidents Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi as well as Gulf rulers does not stop them from gravitating towards Moscow and Beijing.

The Eurasian illiberals and autocrats' Achilles Heel is the fact that their geographies are populated by former empires like Turkey and Russia whose post-imperial notions of national identity remain contested and drive its leaders to define national unity as state unity, control the flow of information, and repressing alternative views expressions of dissent. Turkey and Russia still "see themselves as empires, and, as a general rule, an empire's political philosophy is one of universalism and exceptionalism. In other words, empires don't have friends – they have either enemies or dependencies," said Eurasia scholar Igor Torbakov⁹⁹ and exist in what Russian strategists term "imperial or geopolitical solitude."¹⁰⁰

Erdogan's vision of a modern-day Ottoman empire that encompasses the Turkic and Muslim world as well as the concept of Russia as a state that has to continuously act as an empire or a unique "state civilization" devoid of expansionist ambition despite its premise of a Russian World that embraces the primacy of Russian culture, alongside tolerance for non-Russian cultures promoted by different groups of Russian strategists highlights the pitfalls of Eurasianism.¹⁰¹

That recognition involves a realization that Russia's ambitions in the Middle East, a core Turkish focus, are limited. "Russia is not the Soviet Union. It does not see

98- Max Fisher, After a Rocky 2018, Populism Is Down but Far From Out in the West, The New York Times, 5 January 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/05/world/europe/populism-voters-global.html>

99- Igor Torbakov, Turkey And Russia: The Paradox Of Family Resemblance, LobeLog, 5 January 2019, <https://lobelog.com/turkey-and-russia-the-paradox-of-family-resemblance/>

100- Igor Torbakov, Perspectives: Rethinking the "Russian World" concept, eurasianet, 7 July 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-rethinking-the-russian-world-concept>

101- *Ibid.* Torbakov, Perspectives.

the Middle East as a region that it can dominate. Displacing the United States from the leading position in the Middle East is way above Russia's capacity, and keeping the region in its sphere of influence is way above Russia's resources. Russia has certainly benefited from waning U.S. interest in the Middle East as, absent an active America, Russia can act with more confidence and ease. But it is not Russia that engineered the major shift in U.S. foreign policy in the first place," said Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center and a former Russian military officer. Describing Russia as "a lonely power," Trenin went on to say that the difference between Russian and the Soviet Union was that the "Soviet Union was heavily engaged around the Middle East in spending money on an ideological and geopolitical project, the Russian Federation is active in the region trying to make money. The Soviet Union was about an idea. Russia's idea is about Russia itself."¹⁰²

Both Erdogan and Russia's vision remain controversial. In Erdogan's case it is the Muslim rather than the Turkic world that is unwilling to accept Turkish leadership unchallenged with Saudi Arabia and the UAE leading the charge and Turkish-Iranian relations defined by immediate common interests rather than shared strategic thinking.

Similarly, post-Soviet states take issue with Russia's notion of the primacy of its culture. In doing so, post-Soviet states benefit from the fact that in the words of Bruno Macaes, Russia's greatest geopolitical struggle is "to avoid becoming what ... (US strategist Zbigniew) Brzezinski called a 'black hole' between Europe and China."¹⁰³

Kazakh Central Asia scholar Anna Gussarova cautioned, however, that while Central Asian elites may recognize the risks involved in embracing Russian primacy, the region's public remains far more aligned with Russian culture, at least linguistically.

"Whereas the expert community, which is supposed to shape public opinion, uses the English-language platforms Facebook and Twitter, the general public relies on Russian-language social media. This dichotomy underscores the limitations of any effort by the government and affiliated experts to shape public perceptions. At the same time, this gap shows greater public support for Russia and its activities, which

102- Michael Young, The View from Russia, Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 January 2019, https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/78114?utm_source=rssemail&utm_medium=email&mkt_tok=eyJpJjoiW-m1aak1UVXpOMk5qWWpVeClSInQiOiJsSGptc2InVTINSIppvVmhSeCtDK0JRnkVHaG95UkZsen-QzRmdJcjdzaDBISGNmQ3BUVlMrOFNucGt3dHpLVEYwXC9ZckVrNnRwQThUNlhvSWZ-keEU3ckhEbXQwMnIUdFV2UVJWd2J4NGdNbHhPMTRwUHRVYw50c0lUZGtyK1pSZ08i-fQ%3D%3D

103- *Ibid.* Macaes, The Dawn of Eurasia, p. 55.

makes nation building and language issues difficult and sensitive,” Gussarova said.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

The 21st century’s Great Game is being played by leaders who explicitly cloak themselves in a civilizationalist mantle that draws internationally and/or domestically borders along civilizational rather than national lines. Rather than sparking nationalist flare-ups, their civilizationalist mantle creates the basis for an informal agreement on illiberal and authoritarian principles of governance that would shape a new world order.

Shared visions of illiberal and authoritarian rule among men like Trump, Xi, Putin, Erdogan, Modi, Hungary’s Victor Orban, Saudi Arabia’s Mohammed bin Salman, the Philippines’ Rodrigo Duterte, Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro, and Myanmar’s Win Myint reduce the Great Game to a power struggle over spheres of influence and the sharing of the pie in which concepts such as democracy are hollowed out rather than a competition of ideologies political systems.

John Bolton, Trump’s national security advisor, who resigned in the fall of 2019, harking back to the Cold war minus its ideological component, said as much when, responding to Russian support for Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro, he asserted that “this is our hemisphere. It is not where the Russians ought to be interfering. This is a mistake on their part. It’s not going to lead to an improvement of relations.”¹⁰⁵

104- Anna Gussarova, Russian Security Strategy in Central Asia: On the Edge of No One’s Seat, Bishkek Project, 19 April 2017, <https://www.bishkekproject.com/memos/28>

105- Luc Cohen, Angus Berwick, Maduro hangs on as Venezuelan protests peter out, Reuters, 1 May 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-politics/venezuelan-protests-peter-out-as-maduro-hangs-on-u-s-and-russia-squabble-idUSKCN1S734M>

