By Scott Lowe

"When everyone is dead the Great Game is finished. Not before." – Rudyard Kipling

After the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, like a phoenix rising from the ashes, five entirely new states were suddenly created: Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Collectively, these states are known as Central Asia, although caution is advised on the use of this term when conversing with the people of these states. Within their borders are extensive natural resources, primarily large reserves of oil and gas. In the chaos of the early 1990s, many

commercial enterprises rapidly filled the gap to exploit the mineral wealth of the region. "Central Asia and the Caucasus suddenly found themselves back in the world's headlines" The last time such attention was paid to this area of the world was during the nineteenth century, at the peak of the 'Great Game'.

This term is believed to have been coined by Arthur Connolly, who was an intelligence officer of the East India Company, and had made many reconnaissance missions into Central Asia. It was immortalised by the novel 'Kim', written by Rudyard Kipling, which had its basis in real events that occurred in Central Asia during the nineteenth century.

The character of the 'Great Game' during this period was straightforward. It was a contest for political domination, hegemony and security over the population and the vast land mass that separated the two great powers of the age; Russia and Great Britain. This "shadowy undeclared war" was played out "over the passes and in the valleys" of Central Asia. According to Hopkirk, the original 'Great Game' can be broken down into three distinct phases.

The first phase, and undoubtedly the longest, began in earnest during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. It was not until this stage that both Russia and Great Britain had really begun to dominate the Eurasian land mass, and therefore frighten each other. The rapid expansion of the Russian Empire through the Caucasus and Central Asia, particularly the sending of Cossacks towards India in 1801, set alarm bells ringing at the East India Company. Driven by the threat posed by Imperial Russia, and partly the East India Company's own lack of knowledge of the North West approaches to India, the company sent officers to explore and chart the areas. The British government became increasingly involved during the early part of the nineteenth century, realising that the game needed to be turned from a corporate venture into one of the colonial protection. Secret agents were used heavily in this period, having to "smuggle themselves into the region clad in kaftans." Unfortunately some, like Connolly in 1842, perished "in the Emir of Bukhara's dark prisons." Many commentators at the time believed that the 'Great Game' ended in 1907 with the signing of the Anglo-Russian Convention. But this was only the end of the first phase.

The second phase saw the once embittered enemies joining forces to battle a new foe, Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany, and her thrust to the east, or "Drang Nach Ost". The basic premise of the Germany strategy was to harness "the forces of militant Islam, to foment violent revolutions in British India and Tsarist Central Asia." Things came to a head in the First World War, and this phase culminated with the defeat of Germany in 1918. This period of activity with Germany, Russia and Great Britain has been classified as part of the 'Great Game' because the aims and methods were exactly the same. Undercover German operatives were used to incite the populations and the desire for imperial domination in the region of India and Central Asia.

The brief rapprochement between Russia and Great Britain came to a sudden end in 1917, following the Bolshevik Revolution. The abrogation of the various treaties, made by the Tsars of Russia, initiated the third phase of the 'Great Game'. Lenin set out "by means of armed uprisings, to liberate the whole of Asia from imperialist domination". Once again, the British Empire had reason to be fearful for their territory in India. The operational method employed was the same as the other two phases, with agents finding "themselves playing hide-and-seek across the old 'Great Game' battlefield," as was the aim; the control of India. The exact end of the third phase of the 'Great Game' differs between commentators; Kelly believes that it ended in 1921 with the signing of the Moscow Treaty between Russia and Persia. However, given that for the majority of the 'Great Game' the ultimate goal was the desire to control and protect India, the end date must be the final withdrawal from India by the British in 1947.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the creation of a plethora of independent states, and a growing interest in the mineral rich fields of those countries bordering the Caspian Sea, many analysts dusted off their volumes of Kipling's 'Kim' to declare a 'New Great Game'. According to some of the material written on this topic, "Central Asia is reminiscent once more of the nineteenth century 'Great Game'," where the "grand diplomacy and great congresses in Europe at which the Russian and British empires drew borders and delineated spheres of influence" has returned.

The natural resources of Central Asia, combined with the energy transit routes of the Transcaucasus region, is the focal point of the 'New Great Game' concept. The competition for access, and ultimately dominance, to these resources and their potential worth has been claimed to be stirring "national ambitions, rekindle historical claims, and revive imperial aspirations. Some commentators posit that the United States is the "natural heir of 19th Century British policies to the continental powers." However, in reality, the United States does not have a fundamental strategic reliance on the energy within the Caspian Sea basin. The EU, however, does have "direct, clear and immediate strategic interests in Central Asia.

Russia provides over a quarter of the EU's natural gas," giving it a strategic advantage over Europe. This figure looks set to increase significantly over the coming years; however, as yet the EU has no centralised policy on energy security, which worryingly puts them out of the game. These 'pipeline politics,' which are core to the 'Great Game' debate, are not only confined to Central Asia, and they often take place with many of the same actors. Similar situations have been seen in Saudi Arabia in the early twentieth century and Venezuela and Nigeria in the last decades. Additionally, some of the initial vying for influence and manipulation of the early 1990s has also been seen in Libya and Iran. Using this energy argument as a model for a 'New Great

Game', it could be argued that there is not just one but many 'New Great Games' underway throughout the world.

The overlap of location between the two Great Games demonstrates certain continuity. There are definite similarities, from a geographical perspective, over where the games are, and were, being played. The primary match is Afghanistan, although much of the recent literature on the 'Great Game' refers to the Caspian Sea area, which is a significant distance away to the west. This will no doubt increase given the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008. There is enough similarity between the geographical regions to provide a simple, if somewhat tenuous, frame of reference. Literature on the 'New Great Game' has made reference to very specific areas, such as the Pankisi Gorge, in Georgia, spanning to the entire Eurasian continent. A crossover in the geographical location between the two great games is to be expected with such ambiguity.

One of the starkest contrasts between the original and the concept of a 'New Great Game' is the variety, and complex web, of the different actors involved, including the role they play. During the nineteenth century, the Great Game was played predominantly by two major Imperial powers, Great Britain and Russia. Other "states over whom the game was played had no protection from either of the Imperial powers and were treated as mere proxies and ciphers."

The present situation is radically different to this, with the numbers and different types of actors involved diversified and grown. Britain, as a major player, has disappeared and has been replaced by a number of other states, including USA, China, Pakistan and Iran. Additionally, since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the five new Central Asian states have come into being, each with their own objectives and aims. They are no longer the pawns of great powers; they would have once been entirely subservient, and it would be wrong to assume this now. "On the contrary, they are actors in their own right who can manipulate other protagonists and play them off against each other when it comes to energy contracts, basing rights or political privileges."

This should not be taken as evidence that Russia has no influence in the region; this would not be true, for example it has "succeeded at manipulating its strategic advantages to control the direction and value of Turkmenistan's natural gas development and export policies." However, it has also had some failures, including being unable to "stem the progress by Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan at diversifying their foreign oil relations at Moscow's expense." The new actors' ability to influence the great powers can also be demonstrated with their relationship with the United States. The fact that Uzbekistan asked US to leave its base in Karshi Khanabad in 2005, which they complied with, demonstrates the new states authority. The suggestion of the 'New Great Game', as crafted in the nineteenth century, is an exaggerated one in light of this evidence.

In addition to the traditional actors, the situation is further complicated by the participation of non-state actors; NATO, the Shanghai Corporation Organisation (SCO), the UN, and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) at a supra-state level. At the sub-state level there are a wide range of actors, including multinational oil companies, non-governmental organisations, terrorist groups and criminal organisations. All of these different actors have their own strategic objectives for their presence in the region.

Another facet of the concept of the 'New Great Game' is that the large oil and gas multinationals, who seek exploration and extraction rights in the region, are the puppets of the state to which they are affiliated. Although this might be the case for the state owned companies, it is not when dealing with global multinational firms. Although they could be registered in one country, their shareholders could be global institutions and foreign owned. Co-operation between consortia in the oil and gas industry is more often the case than competition, and production sharing agreements, or PSAs, are a good demonstration of their willingness to work together. In Azerbaijan alone some 23 PSAs have been signed since 1993. Most of these 23 PSAs are headed or funded by Western supermajor oil companies. Competition remains a strong part of market economics but there are close relationships and partnerships. 'New Great Game' enthusiasts who argue there is not co-operation in Central Asia "ignores the reality of the evidence, which undermines the whole concept of the 'Great Game', based as it is on competition."

Co-operation is not solely related to multinational oil conglomerates; it also extends to the state level as well. Although many advocates of the 'New Great Game' theory argue that Russia exploits the former Soviet Union influence on the oil and gas producing states, the reality is that oil is transported from Central Asia not via the Russian Federation. As of 2006, "China is financing a pipeline through Kazakhstan to access Caspian Sea energy supplies." In fact, China and Russia "cooperate more closely in Central Asia than in any other world region."This is not limited to the East; oil from Azerbaijan flows westwards to the Black Sea Ports through the Baku to Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline. The Russian retaliation to the Georgian invasion of South Ossetia in August 2008 is an example of how Russia has flexed its muscles within its traditional sphere of influence. However, it is unlikely that this is the beginning of a new Russian Imperial era, such as in the nineteenth century. The global interdependence nature of the world in which Russia resides means that it cannot afford to isolate itself.

The growing issue of terrorism and other transnational criminal activities, such as narcotic trafficking, has highlighted another area of co-operation at the inter-state level. The United States, Russia, and China all have an interest in addressing narcotics trafficking, human trafficking, and illegal arms trade in the region. The attacks on the World Trade Centre, closely followed by the intervention in Afghanistan led to an increase in the discussion regarding a 'New Great Game'. However, fundamental evidence has been missing from these theories. For a 'New Great Game' to exist there needs to be more than one side playing and in this case there was not. The coalition put together by diplomatic activity in the 'war against terror' included Russia and all of the Central Asian states.

Russia has an interest in stabilising Afghanistan due to the huge amount of heroin that flows into its borders from there, causing widespread social and economic disruption. The willingness to co-operate on these issues is evident in the creation of various structures in the Central Asian region, including the SCO, where members discuss issues related to border controls and transnational security issues. Further co-operation has expanded westward, and for several years Russian representatives have called on NATO to work directly with the CSTO on joint projects, especially reducing terrorism and drug trafficking in Central Asia. The high level of collaboration between the various actors with an interest in this region, provides compelling evidence to dispel the myth of a 'New Great Game' being played.

It is cleare that the concept of a 'New Great Game,' that has been posited over the last couple of decades, is derived more from journalistic convenience than true academic rigour. The political and economic realities are completely different. The dominance, enjoyed by the Imperial powers in the nineteenth century, over the bit-part actors of the day, is no longer as strong, or as evident. The Central Asian states themselves have more authority over the resources at their disposal, and are prepared to make arrangements with all major powers to their benefit. The only real similarity between the original and the new 'Great Game' concept is that of physical geography; both being played out in the same exotic and obscure area of the world.

The number of external and non-state actors is large, their aims far more complex than it was in the nineteenth century. The level of co-operation between the actors is also far larger than during the original 'Great Game', generally relying on statecraft and negotiation, rather than conflict. The notable exception that proves the rule was the Georgian conflict in 2008.

Finally, given the limited evidence for calling the situation today a 'New Great Game', there is real threat that the full complexity of the situation and current meaning will not be fully appreciated or recognised. This is especially dangerous for the EU as they are becoming more dependent on Russian gas supplies, and as a policy recommendation, this should be high on its agenda. The analytical value of the concept is only useful if it is not used solely as a label, as it has been applied often, which would be deleterious to any further understanding of the situation. Given the complexities of the situation, it is necessary to look the component parts, both individually and collectively. Failure to do so will make it very difficult to distinguish the normal every day politics, business, and economics in the region, from any serious security threats.