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Kazakhstan May Be the Next Ukraine

By Richard Lourie

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After a lapse of more than a century, the Great Game has begun again — in Kiev of all places.

In the 19th century, the Great Game was the rivalry between the British and Russian empires for Central Asia. England was wary that Russia's relentless expansion would one day threaten the jewel in the imperial crown, India. Both sides vied to dominate Central Asia's markets.

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The game went into a state of suspension during Soviet times. Some commentators spoke of a new Great Game after the Soviet collapse and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, but that was more romanticism than realism. There was a jockeying among Russia, China and the U.S.

for markets, resources and military bases, but what was lacking was any grand geopolitical design or strategic imperative. All that changed with Kiev.

Though the final outcome of the Ukrainian crisis is uncertain, two things are already clear. Russia has revealed itself as non-Western, if not anti-Western. When push comes to shove, Russia will not play by the rules of the West because it does not see the world as the West does. In Putin's Darwinian mind, the drift of Ukraine into the Western camp would complete NATO's encirclement of Russia, which, from the survival point of view, is inadmissible. Foolishly, perhaps, he is not overly concerned about the economic damage the sanctions will cause. No doubt he believes that ties with European business are too tight and complex to permit sanctions that bite deep. Putin, the enemy of the rules of globalization, is counting on globalization to save him.

All the same, Putin's not taking any chances. He is aware that something has broken in his relations with the West. It will take time, but the West has already begun weaning itself from Russian energy. And so the main effect of Kiev has been to accelerate Russia's turn to China.

Putin has said of Russian-Chinese relations: "We do not have a single irritating element in our ties." In fact, the relationship is fraught with tension. First and foremost is what could be called Russia's demographophobia. In the country's vast Far East, there are only 7 million people, while China's three northern provinces bulge with more than 100 million. Many are already working in Russia, crossing the border as Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin quips "in small groups of 5 million."

Putin settled all outstanding border disputes with China in 2004 — for which he was savagely attacked by liberals who accused him of "capitulation" and even of being a "Chinese agent of influence." But no one could be more aware of the importance of conventional border agreements than Russia, which has just violated its own Budapest Memorandum pledge to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Russia fears becoming no more than a source of raw materials and energy for China and a market for its products. China itself would never let itself be put in a position of dependency on Russian energy.

And that is where the Great Game comes back in. What Russia learned in Ukraine is that a good-sized piece of a country can be sliced off if it has a high percentage of Russian speakers and if they express their will for annexation in a referendum.

The Ukrainian template fits nicely onto Kazakhstan. That country is rich in resources and sparsely populated — 17 million. Twenty five percent of the population are Russian, a number which reaches 50 percent in the northern and northeastern parts of the country. When envisioning a post-Soviet Russia, Alexander Solzhenitsyn posited a new state formed of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Northern Kazakhstan called "southern Siberia."

At the moment, Kazakhstan seems quiet and stable, but that will not last long since the man ruling the country since Soviet times, Nursultan Nazarbayev, is now in his mid 70s and reported to have prostate cancer. He has no sons and is not known to have made any plans for his succession. A certain amount of turmoil can realistically be expected upon his death.

And if there isn't any, some can always be created.

Kazakhstan's limited military forces of some 70,000 would not offer significant resistance to Russia. Seizing their "rightful" portion of Kazakhstan would bring Russia great riches and enormous geopolitical advantages. Russia's already long, 4,400-kilometer border with China would be substantially increased. Although China may have thus far resisted becoming energy dependent on Russia, it may now find itself in a new form of dependence. Since a great deal of China's energy imports and manufactured exports pass through Kazakhstan, Russia would gain control over that flow. Russia would also gain political power through control of the border with Xinjiang, where Uighur insurgents contest Han domination.

The U.S. is pretty much the odd man out in the new Great Game. Under Russian pressure, the U.S. is being expelled from its last foothold in Central Asia, the Manas air base it has rented outside the Kyrgyz capital. That base had been used to ferry men and materiel to and from Afghanistan. The Kyrgyz government simply refused to renegotiate terms. And so the army of the richest nation on earth will exit Central Asia under the inglorious banner: LOST OUR LEASE.

Now the U.S. is shopping around Central Asia for a place from which to launch drone attacks after the year-end pullout from Afghanistan. The contrast with Russia could not be starker. Moscow has found its way again in Central Asia on a road that leads straight from Kiev to Kazakhstan. It now has a strategic imperative. The Great Game is very much back on.

Richard Lourie is the author of "The Autobiography of Joseph Stalin" and "Sakharov: A Biography."

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