

Fallout of a New Great Game?

By Prem Mahadevan
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Commentary on the [Moscow bombings](#) has focused on the likely involvement of Chechen 'Black Widows,' an angle which links the bombings to the Chechen separatist movement. However, there is an alternative explanation, which does not exclude the separatist dimension but subsumes it within a larger analytical framework, like a Russian doll. This is the possibility that Islamist terrorism in Russia is a by-product of an intelligence war over Central Asia - a modern day version of the Great Game.

The 'Great Game' was a term used to describe Russo-British rivalry in Central Asia during the 19th century. It involved intrepid spymasters, cartographers and ethnographers from both sides who ventured into the Asiatic wilderness to map out its features and buy the loyalties of local tribesmen. At the core of their secret missions was Afghanistan, which served as a buffer state between Russia and British India.

Today, as US-led NATO forces prepare to withdraw from Afghanistan, the stage appears set for the continuation of a new Great Game, which has been played out since the late 1980s between Russia and Pakistan. The latter has assumed the role previously played by imperial Britain i.e., opposition to Russian influence in Asia. Its strategic elite visualize themselves as having to navigate geopolitics as their predecessors did - through local proxies. Their intention is to leverage Pakistan's geographic location for economic benefit, since the country itself lacks a strong natural resource base.

Such a policy is reflective of the general trend in Pakistani grand strategy since the 1950s, which aimed to monetarize the country's proximity to Central Asia. At first, it permitted western intelligence agencies to set up technical collection facilities aimed at the Soviet Union, in exchange for developmental aid. With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan became a frontline state in Operation Mosquito - the US and Saudi-led covert operation that armed Afghan resistance fighters during the 1980s.

It was while assisting the Afghan resistance that Pakistan began to regard Soviet-controlled Central Asia as a region where it could expand its influence. Having conceptualized itself as a Pan-Islamic state, it encouraged the spread of political Islam among the Muslim population of the southern Soviet Republics. Initially, support for an Islamist rebellion in these states was confined to propaganda distributed by Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) agency. However, with the disintegration of the Soviet

Union, such support escalated into financial and physical contacts between Pakistan-based Islamists and local separatist groups.

The mid 1990s saw Russian officials [blaming Pakistani Islamists](#) for sheltering Chechen separatist leaders and training them in paramilitary tactics. Simultaneously, the ISI and a group of transport contractors in the Pakistani city of Quetta sponsored an Afghan militia called the Taliban. The latter swept over large tracts of Afghanistan in 1994-96, eventually coming to power in Kabul and executing the pro-Russian president. What remained of Moscow's influence in Afghanistan retreated to the northern-most corner of the country.

Constituting the Northern Alliance, this collection of Afghan ethnic minorities controlled a thin wedge of territory that cut Afghanistan off from the rest of Central Asia. They received support from Russia, India and Iran. Meanwhile, 90 percent of Afghanistan came under the Pashtun-dominated Taliban who, not coincidentally, shared their ethnicity with a majority of officers in the ISI.

The worst years of Russo-Chechen tensions coincided with Taliban dominance in Afghanistan. This is not to suggest that a causal relationship existed between the two. It is merely to emphasize that Central Asia and the Caucasus were ravaged by religious militancy simultaneously.

[Linking the two regions](#) was a vision that a handful of senior ISI officials had about creating an Islamic 'security belt,' that would have the Central Asian 'stans' as its buckle. Even as Soviet forces were withdrawing from Afghanistan in 1988, the agency's Afghan Bureau lobbied for a thrust into the Russian sphere of influence. It hoped that Islamism could fill the ideological space vacated by communism. In part due to the repressive practices of the Soviet state regarding religion, the implementation of this policy won converts in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The rebellions that broke out in these states after 1991 received [strong encouragement](#) from Pakistani Islamist groups like the Tablighi Jamaat and Jamaat-e-Islami. (As revealed by writers such as former ISI officer Mohammad Yousaf, author of *Afghanistan the Bear Trap*, and Indian journalist MJ Akbar, author of *The Shade of Swords*.)

Islamabad's official motive for seeking an ideological foothold in Central Asia was (and still is) grounded in a narrative of 'strategic depth.' Put simply, this holds that Pakistan lacks the capability to withstand an Indian conventional military assault and as such needs friendly neighbors to its West. Although such a rationale had some merit when it was originally formulated in the late 1980s, it has long since outlived its viability.

The nuclearization of Indo-Pakistani hostility in 1998 nullified Islamabad's fears of a conventional military defeat. Repeated crises between the two sides have not escalated into war precisely because of the nuclear factor. The real reason for Pakistani interest in Central Asia is therefore not military survival but economic gain.

The Taliban's sponsors in Quetta had originally hoped it would serve as a road-clearing party that would open up trade routes between Pakistani ports and Central Asian markets. Owing to interference by the Northern Alliance however, this design was frustrated. Subsequent Pakistani attempts to loosen ties between Central Asian governments and Moscow through trade agreements remained unsuccessful due to suspicions that Pakistani Islamists supported rebellious groups with the ISI's knowledge.

In this context, the impending retreat of NATO forces from Afghanistan opens up the possibility of an Islamist resurgence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The Moscow bombings were, on one level, motivated by local considerations (such as avenging the recent assassinations of top Chechen terrorists by Russian forces). On another level, they were linked to shifts in the Afghan strategic situation. With Russia agreeing to facilitate the resupply of NATO forces in Afghanistan, the Taliban and their sponsors are worried about once again being hedged in by Moscow.

The [proposed Northern Distribution Network](#) would enhance connectivity between Afghanistan and the Russian sphere of influence in Central Asia. It would also significantly reduce NATO dependence on supply convoys routed through Pakistan - a factor which would lose Islamabad several hundred million dollars in transit fees and might explain the sudden drop in Taliban attacks on the convoys.

Given that members of Chechen separatist groups are known to be fighting alongside the Taliban, it is quite possible that the two have a long-term convergence of views regarding the need to [resist Russian influence](#) in the region. If this is the case, it is likely that as the war in Afghanistan intensifies, so will terrorist attacks in Russia.

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