

# CHINA, RUSSIA, AND THE U.S.: THEIR INTERESTS, POSTURES, AND INTERRELATIONS IN CENTRAL ASIA<sup>1</sup>

Zhao HUASHENG

*Senior research fellow and director of the Department of  
Russian and Central Asian Studies at SIRS  
(Shanghai, People's Republic of China)*

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## U.S. Interests in Central Asia

They can be roughly divided into three aspects.

**Counter-terrorism is the primary interest of the United States in Central Asia at present.**

The events of 9/11 in 2001 greatly changed the U.S.'s traditional security concept and its security

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<sup>1</sup> Concluded from *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 5 (29), 2004.

strategy. The threat of international terrorism has become the U.S.'s most urgent security threat, and counter-terrorism is the U.S.'s central strategic concern. Central Asia is in a suitable geographic location for dealing a blow to international terrorism. Counter-terrorism is a long-term undertaking and Central Asia has not lost its geographical and political significance in the U.S.'s pursuit of international counter-terrorism.

**Control of Caspian energy resources.** Control over the world's energy resources, including Caspian energy, was one of the U.S.'s strategic goals even before 9/11. American companies have been taking an active part in energy exploitation in Central Asia during the past decade.<sup>2</sup> The events of 9/11 highlighted once more for the United States the strategic importance of maintaining control over world energy resources. Central Asia and the Caspian, which have huge reserves of natural gas, are considered the world's most likely candidate for future energy production. Gaining control over the energy resources of Central Asia and the Caspian is part of the U.S.'s general strategy for controlling the world's energy resources.

**Counter-terrorism is not the only objective of the U.S.'s presence in Central Asia. It has another goal—geopolitical.** Central Asia is Russia's traditional sphere of influence and China's strategic rear area. The U.S. is located a long way from the area and has no deep historic and strategic roots there. The U.S.'s sudden military presence in Central Asia in the name of counter-terrorism is, to Russia, an intrusion into its traditional sphere of influence and, to China, an intrusion into its strategic rear area. What is more, the area that the U.S. has its foot on is in close proximity to China. Never before in history has the U.S. entered Central Asia, or set up military bases there. The U.S. military presence in Central Asia could serve the purpose of monitoring and deterring China, preventing Russia from restoring its control over Central Asia, encouraging Central Asia to become independent of Russia, and restricting Iran's influence in Central Asia. Although the U.S. insists that it is not pursuing any ulterior motive in Central Asia aimed against Russia and China, and that it hopes to cooperate with Russia and China in Central Asia, geopolitical interests with respect to the U.S.'s military presence on the borders and in the regions contiguous to Russia and China are obvious. As Andrew J. Bacevich put it, "the [Bush] administration has from the outset waged its war with one eye fixed on rooting out terrorists, and the other set on gauging the prospects for advancing a variety of other U.S. interests."<sup>3</sup> Geopolitical interests are no doubt a crucial element of the U.S.'s other interests.

## The U.S. Posture in Central Asia

In contrast to Russia and China, the U.S.'s strategic presence in Central Asia is remarkable given the natural limitation of U.S.-Central Asian relations. The Central Asia nations are not sister republics to the U.S., as they have been to Russia, nor are they immediate neighbors, nor do they share a long common history with the U.S., as they do with China. The U.S. is at the other end of the world from Central Asia, which sits in the innermost Eurasian hinterland. As Prof. Charles Fairbanks puts it, "Before that date [11 September], Central Asia was one of the most obscure places on earth to most Americans... many Americans have considerable difficulty pronouncing or finding [it on a map]."<sup>4</sup> In the early post-Soviet period, given the enormous geopolitical upheaval in the world after the fall of the Soviet Union, the greatest challenge to the U.S. was Russia's development following these dramatic changes. The U.S. was most concerned with the possible proliferation of nuclear weapons in the former

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<sup>2</sup> American companies which have joined energy projects in Kazakhstan include Chevron, ExxonMobil, Occidental Petroleum, Texaco, CaesarOil, IPI, Orix\McGee, AMHK (see: M.B. Olcott, *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p. 299).

<sup>3</sup> Andrew J. Bacevich, "Steppes to Empire," *The National Interests*, Summer 2002, p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Ch. Fairbanks, "Being There," *The National Interest*, Summer 2002, p. 39.

Soviet Union. Thus, at this stage, Russia was the core country in U.S. diplomacy regarding the former Soviet states, which was symbolically dubbed as “Russia first diplomacy.” U.S. strategy on Central Asia at this stage was relatively vague and so were its interests in the region. The U.S.’s basic policy in this region was to prevent Kazakhstan from holding onto its nuclear weapons and to keep the region independent and stable. Additionally, the U.S. was interested in the energy resources in the region. As professors Svante E. Cornell and Regine A. Spector commented, “The U.S.’s initial engagement with the region in the early to mid-1990s concentrated on legislation to provide bilateral and economic development assistance to the region (the Freedom Support Act of 1992); the removal of nuclear weapons from the newly independent states, including Kazakhstan; and the development of the Caspian energy reserves.”<sup>5</sup> Until 4 April, 2000, when Secretary of State Albright visited Central Asia, no high-ranking U.S. statesmen had visited the region since former Secretary of State James Baker made a trip to it in 1992.

The U.S. increased its attention toward Central Asia after the mid-1990s, which was mainly due to the following facts: the shock caused by the fall of the Soviet Union had subsided, which made it possible for the U.S. to divert its attention to other areas besides Russia; U.S.-Russian relations turned from romantic to lukewarm, their relations could be described as “cold peace,” and the U.S. imposed more geopolitical constraints on Russia; the Taliban took power in Afghanistan; terrorism in Central Asia increased; and the threat of instability in Central Asia loomed large. In March 1997, U.S. National Security Advisor Sandy Berger noted that Central Asia was one of the United States’ foreign policy priorities. This was the first time the U.S. had defined its policy regarding the region. In July of the same year, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Talbot expounded the U.S.’s Central Asia policy.<sup>6</sup> The U.S. began to increase its political, economic, and military input into Central Asia, encouraged the Central Asian nations to set up an economic cooperation mechanism without Russia’s involvement—the Central Asian Economic Community, and tried its best to promote the building of the BTC pipeline, which bypasses Russia and undermines Russia’s control over Central Asian energy export. Since 1997, the U.S. has been supporting the Central Asian Battalion (CENTRASBAT), including military exercises in 1997, which involved 500 parachutists from the U.S. 82nd Airborne Division landing in Central Asia. At the same time, U.S.-led NATO has been actively penetrating the region. After Kyrgyzstan’s initial participation, all the Central Asian nations joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. The U.S. allotted Central Asia and the Caucasus \$1.9 billion between 1992 and 1999 to promote democracy and reform.<sup>7</sup> But, until 11 September, 2001, the degree to which the U.S. was concerned with and involved in Central Asia was limited, and the U.S.’s strategic posture in the region was not prominent.

9/11 abruptly launched Central Asia into the center of U.S. concerns, which resulted in a tremendous rise in Central Asia’s significance in U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. built military bases in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan and sent its troops to Central Asia to combat the Taliban. It has greatly changed the geostrategic scene in Central Asia and there has been a remarkable increase in U.S. influence in the region. In many ways, the U.S. has squeezed Russia and China out of Central Asia and become “the de facto protector and guarantor of the region.”<sup>8</sup> Although China and Russia still occupy an important place in Central Asia, as noted earlier, the U.S.’s standing took priority following the events of 9/11, and the balance of the three powers in Central Asia has shifted in favor of the U.S.

<sup>5</sup> S.E. Cornell, R.A. Spector, “Central Asia: More than Islamic Extremists,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2002, p. 201.

<sup>6</sup> Still, while recognizing Central Asia as an important region for the U.S., Mr. Strobe Talbott argued that the region was not of critical strategic importance to the U.S. (see: E.B. Rumer, “SShA i Tsentral’naia Azia posle 11 sentiabria,” *Strategic Forum*, No. 195, December 2002, p. 3).

<sup>7</sup> See: *The Security of the Caspian Sea Region*, SIPRI, Oxford University Press 2001, p. 137.

<sup>8</sup> Ch.W. Maynes, “America Discovers Central Asia,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2003, p. 121.

## Can China, Russia and the U.S. Cooperate in Central Asia?

China, Russia, and the U.S. are playing prominent roles in Central Asia, are coming to strategic terms with each other, and are going to maintain a long-term strategic presence there. The strategic interests of the three powers, either conflicting or consenting, will certainly lead to the development of strategic relations among them.

Three scenarios can be identified in their future relations. The first is open confrontation. The second is obscure strategic relations. The third is a strategic dialog.

China, Russia, and the U.S. will not go for open confrontation for several reasons. Generally speaking, the relations among the three powers in Central Asia depend on their overall relations. In other words, if their overall relations turn sour, their relations in Central Asia will become tense. On the contrary, if their overall relations are good, their relations in Central Asia will not be hostile or openly confrontational.

Conversely, in spite of the tripartite configuration among the three powers, especially the confrontation between Russia and the U.S., like two tigers gazing at each other from their military bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, none of the three powers wants to undermine bilateral relations on the parochial issue of Central Asia. Peaceful coexistence of the three powers in Central Asia restrains their open confrontation as well. None of the three powers intends to ally with one against the other. And none of them wants to see a united front formed by two against the third. At the same time, none of them wants to see Central Asia monopolized by one power. Therefore, the game played by the three powers is good for maintaining a balance of power, but not for open confrontation in any form.

Obscure strategic relations refer to ambiguous or unstable relations, which is actually true of the relations among China, Russia, and the U.S. in Central Asia. The relations among the three powers in Central Asia are not obscure of their own choosing, rather this is attributed to their lack or uncertainty of clear policies. At present, none of the three powers has a clear policy regarding their relations. But obscure strategic relations might be their chosen policy and tactics in the future, so they could last for a considerably long time and even become the norm for their relations in Central Asia.

Obscure strategic relations are more likely to be a transitional mode. China, Russia, and the U.S. are the most influential powers with vital interests in Central Asia. Since there is no open confrontation, the three powers will probably try to form a mechanism for managing their tripartite relations, or reach some kind of agreement in order to avoid any disorder, which could be followed by uncertainty and instability in the relations among them. This kind of mechanism would be to the benefit of all three powers.

It is not only possible, but also necessary for China, Russia, and the U.S. to form a cooperation framework.

China, Russia, and the U.S. do not intend to go into conflict with each other in Central Asia. This could be a subjective prerequisite for their strategic dialog or cooperation in the region. The U.S. military presence in Central Asia is like a wedge driven into the back of China and Russia. In addition to combating terrorism, the U.S.'s basic aim is to implement its global strategic policy, although at present it does not want to provoke China and Russia or directly confront them in the region. The U.S.'s primary goal therefore is to retain its foothold in Central Asia, consolidate and expand its influence in the region, and counterbalance China and Russia's influence. But at the same time, the U.S. has made it clear that it harbors no hostility toward China and Russia and does not intend to harm their interests, but instead is seeking some kind of cooperation with them. The U.S.'s intention to join the SCO as an observer is a positive step. The U.S.'s long-term military presence in Central Asia is not acceptable to Russia. As Professor Alexander Rar put it, Russia and the U.S. "are pursuing diametrically opposite goals. Russia seeks to get a strong foothold in political and economic terms in South Caucasus and Central Asia in order to create the possibility of resuming integration in the space of the former Soviet Union. On the contrary, the U.S.'s

goal is to do its utmost to prevent Russia from rallying the former Soviet Union around itself.”<sup>9</sup> Following its military deployment in Central Asia, the U.S. continues to advance on Georgia in the Caucasus and be more aggressive in Eastern Europe and the Baltic Region, which was undoubtedly a long-standing strategic challenge to Russia. It implies general entry into Russia’s “near abroad” from Ukraine, the Caucasus and Central Asia, and a further loss in Russia’s influence in the most important strategic regions. However, since Russia is unable to drive the U.S. out of Central Asia and the Caucasus, it has to accept reality and treat the U.S. as an interlocutor with the equal right to a military presence in Central Asia.

The U.S.’s long-term military presence in Central Asia is not acceptable to China either. Although the U.S. military presence in Central Asia does not pose the direct menace to China most have worried about, it does create a strategic posture unfavorable to China. It is a latent threat to China when Sino-U.S. relations are normal. But if relations turn sour, it will render strategic containment on China and leave China with a two-front confrontation. Therefore, the U.S. military presence in Central Asia has a dual effect on China. While it plays a certain positive role for China strategically and in the long-term, it could be unfavorable, particularly in the absence of a strategic understanding between China and the U.S. But, like Russia, China will have to face the reality of a long-term U.S. military presence in Central Asia and cooperate in some way with the United States. This does not mean that China welcomes the U.S.’s long-term military presence in the region. Instead, this merely implies China’s pragmatism with respect to a *fait accompli*, i.e. China is making the most of the situation and alleviating its detrimental effect as much as possible. As mentioned above, with respect to the composition of their interests in Central Asia, there is a broad area where the interests of China, Russia, and the U.S. converge, i.e. counter-terrorism, maintaining regional security, combating religious extremism, etc. These are objective conditions on which China, Russia, and the U.S. could hold a dialog and establish cooperation in Central Asia.

Counter-terrorism is their greatest common interest and the area they can cooperate in most aptly. Counter-terrorism in Central Asia serves the U.S.’s strategic goal of combating world terrorism, Russia’s goal of eliminating terrorism in its south, and China’s goal of preventing separatism in East Turkestan. Therefore, the three powers share a solid foundation on which they can cooperate in counter-terrorism. Another common goal of the three powers in Central Asia is to maintain stability and development in Central Asia. Stability in Central Asia does not mean the same for all three powers, but it is vital to all of their interests. Regional stability is closely linked to counter-terrorism. The Central Asian nations as a whole are fairly weak and stricken with severe political, economic, religious, ethnic, and social problems. Therefore, it is difficult for them to prevent terrorism and extremism from intruding into their territories, and they could even become fertile ground themselves for cultivating terrorism and extremism. Any turmoil in Central Asia will trigger terrorism and extremism, then threaten the security interests of all three powers.

Their next common concern is non-traditional threats and global issues, such as drug trafficking and the environment. They have no fundamental differences regarding those issues.

In terms of real strength and influence, China, Russia, and the U.S. have formed a tripartite configuration in Central Asia. The three powers differ though in the extent to which they are wielding their power in Central Asia. The U.S. resorts to its powerful economic, military, and political resources, and strength. Russia bases its influence on the political, economic, military, cultural, linguistic, and social links it has formed with Central Asia over a span of 150 years. China is blessed mostly with its geographical proximity to Central Asia and its extensive communication lines with the region, owing to its long border with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, as well as its ever growing economic strength and influence. All three powers have recognized and accepted each other’s inevitable strategic presence in Central Asia, i.e. accepted the legitimacy of each other’s strategic presence, which differs from their military presence, in Central Asia, although this does not necessarily mean that they welcome this presence. This is another reason why China, Russia, and the U.S. could peacefully coexist in the region.

<sup>9</sup>A. Rar, “‘Bol’shaia igra’ na post-sovetskom prostranstve,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 29 September, 2003.

Although the Central Asia nations differ to some extent in their attitude towards the Chinese, Russian, and U.S. presence in the region, they all have an omnidirectional foreign policy in common, i.e. developing relations with all the major powers and gaining the maximum political, security, and economic advantage from the balance of power and counterbalance among the three powers. At the same time, the Central Asian nations do not want to see a direct conflict among the major powers in Central Asia lest their territories become the victims of this battleground. They could gain much more from a balance among the great powers than from confrontation among them. So they have no intention of provoking or augmenting a major power confrontation. In this way, the Central Asian nations are not precluding the presence of any of the three powers in Central Asia. This is also an important prerequisite for the long-term strategic presence and cooperation of the three powers.

At the present stage, China, Russia, and the U.S. have not created any form of mechanism or mechanical framework for their relations in Central Asia. This is largely because there is no foundation on which the three powers could engage directly. As for the subjective aspect of the problem, the issue of the “legitimacy” of the U.S.’s long-term military presence in Central Asia has yet to be resolved. This does not mean legitimacy in terms of international law, but recognition and acceptance of this state of affairs by Russia and China. When the U.S. first made its military presence known in Central Asia, it promised it would be temporary and would not endanger China and Russia’s interests. China and Russia also explicitly demanded withdrawal of U.S. troops from Central Asia once the Afghan antiterrorist campaign ended. The U.S. never claimed that its military presence in Central Asia would be permanent. Nor did China and Russia declare their acceptance of the U.S.’s long-term military presence in Central Asia. The present state of affairs shows that the U.S. is certainly not willing to give up its military bases in Central Asia any time soon, even if the situation in Afghanistan is stabilized. In fact, U.S. troops will continue to be deployed in Central Asia for a long time to come. Of course, the U.S. is unlikely to publicly declare this intention. Nor are China and Russia likely to be unaware of it. But China and Russia will not retreat from their original stance, that is, welcoming and accepting the U.S. permanent military bases deployed in their backyards and rear area. This is an embarrassing situation. The U.S. is perpetuating its military presence in Central Asia, although undeclared. China and Russia still insist that the U.S. keep its promise. Therefore, the legitimacy problem of the U.S.’s long-term military presence is a perturbing problem in the relations among the three powers.

The “legitimacy problem” of the U.S.’s long-term military presence in Central Asia will probably be resolved as time goes on. The three powers might be pragmatic enough to shelve the problem in order to create prerequisites for their strategic dialog.

As for the technical dimension, there are no appropriate channels for dialog or a platform for cooperation among China, Russia, and the U.S. The SCO and other mechanisms of dialog and cooperation exist between China and Russia. But there are no such mechanisms between China and the U.S., between Russia and the U.S., or among China, Russia, and the U.S. The three powers stand like a triad in Central Asia, but with no path leading to each other’s door.

Another obstacle to cooperation in Central Asia is how to cooperate, i.e. in what way, in what form, and on what issues. Following the fall of the Taliban, China, Russia, and the U.S. no longer had a specific target of counter-terrorism. They do not know how to continue their cooperation in counter-terrorism and maintain stability in Central Asia.<sup>10</sup> There is no platform on which to base their cooperation, and it is hard to find or create one. Cooperation between China and Russia does not figure here, since the two countries have already set up a stable cooperation framework; cooperation among China, Russia, and the U.S. is about the cooperation between China and Russia, on the one hand, and with the U.S., on the other. At present and in the foreseeable future, China and Russia have no intention of threatening each other strategically. In the above context, although bilateral cooperation within the China—Russia—U.S. triad, i.e.

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<sup>10</sup> Bates Gill and Matthew Oresman suggest that the U.S., China, and Russia could establish a range of low-level cooperation projects, including building and equipping border outposts; increasing military-to-military transparency in Central Asia; conducting de-mining operations in border areas; sharing intelligence on illegal cross-border activities; funding HIV/AIDS projects; and improving the social welfare infrastructure (see: B. Gill, M. Oresman, *China’s New Journey to the West*, A Report of the CSIS Freeman Chair in China Studies, August 2003, p. 42).

Sino-U.S. cooperation and Russian-U.S. cooperation, is necessary and natural, development of cooperation will not yield positive results if there is no parallel trilateral cooperation. Suspicion may arise between China and Russia, which would be detrimental to the fledgling cooperation relations between these two countries. Therefore, bilateral cooperation and multilateral cooperation which go hand in hand are most desirable. What China, Russia, and the U.S. ultimately need in Central Asia is a multilateral cooperation framework. Mere bilateral cooperation can hardly settle the issue of multilateral relations. Multilateral cooperation among China, Russia, and the U.S. should consist of dialog, communication, consultation, and collaboration. Intensive multilateral cooperation is unrealistic at the present stage. There is no urgent need for China, Russia, and the U.S. to set up a separate trilateral cooperation framework in Central Asia. In addition, any cooperation framework that excludes the Central Asian nations will be problematic. A multilateral cooperation mechanism on a larger scale may be a more realistic and effective option for establishing a dialog and cooperation among China, Russia, and the U.S., i.e. they could turn to a multilateral mechanism that already exists as a venue for their trilateral dialog and cooperation. There are two possible mechanisms that could play this role: the SCO and NATO's Partnership for Peace program (PfP). As for the SCO, China and Russia are already members, and the U.S. could join as an observer or a dialogue country. As for the PfP, Russia and the U.S. are already members, and China need only join.<sup>11</sup> The options are themselves significant strategic choices, the importance of which exceeds the necessity of merely providing a dialog and cooperation platform for the three powers and will give rise to a range of more urgent issues.

Thus, a strategic assessment should be made before accepting the options. The SCO is highly institutionalized and dominated by China and Russia. Limited U.S. participation in SCO activities would raise the status and influence of the SCO and help the SCO to become a truly regional political and security organization.

This option has its negative aspect though. U.S. membership would decentralize the SCO, making it one of many multilateral centers, and even make it irrelevant. China's participation in the PfP would ensure its involvement in the U.S. and NATO political and security mechanisms in Central Asia, which would help China to remain active in Central Asian affairs, secure more room for maneuvering, and exert broader influence on the region at various levels and via different channels. In addition, it is inevitable that NATO will enlarge in some way in Central Asia. China is bound to engage NATO and cooperate with it in the region. Notwithstanding, the enlargement of NATO in Central Asia will deal a blow to the SCO and reduce its standing and functions, which is undesirable.

Common interests and cooperation is one thing, while the well-being and sustainability of cooperation is quite another. Firstly, cooperation, once it happens, will be passive rather than active. Secondly, China, Russia, and the U.S. have diverging, as well as converging interests in Central Asia. In terms of the traditional security threat, the U.S. military presence in Central Asia is a threat to China and Russia's security interests. The U.S. military presence in Central Asia indicates a rise in U.S. influence in Central Asia and a relative decline in China and Russia's influence, although in terms of a non-traditional threat, the stability of Central Asia contributes to an improvement in security on China and Russia's periphery. This presumption might be dismissed as zero-sum game mentality. However, this presumption is not purely ungrounded, because the players of the game have not abandoned the zero-sum mentality. The American academic community is candid enough to say, "Russian attempts to 'reintegrate' the former Soviet Union, such as they are, run counter to our diplomatic design. We can affect Russian behavior, however, not only by negotiating with them but by changing the facts with which they work. Stronger states in Central Asia will diminish Russia's interest in a revisionist foreign policy. Thus, a policy aimed primarily at preventing and deterring terrorism can work at the same time as a bulwark against lingering imperial tendencies in Russian foreign policy."<sup>12</sup> These remarks show the scrambling for a sphere of influence.

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<sup>11</sup> In October, 2003 China and NATO implemented the first official contact in their history. It is an important symbol. It demonstrates that the door to dialog between China and NATO has been opened. In light of this, cooperation between China and NATO within the framework of PfP in Central Asia would be a proper start.

<sup>12</sup> Ch. Fairbanks, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

Therefore, the more they cooperate in Central Asia, the greater the contradictions in their cooperation will be. The more their interests converge in one direction, the further their interests will diverge in another direction. The root cause of the paradox lies in the contradiction between traditional security and non-traditional security, or between the new security concept and geopolitical logic. The paradox draws a boundary, be it horizontal and vertical, of cooperation among the three powers in Central Asia, which hampers comprehensive and in-depth cooperation. Whether the three powers can extricate themselves from this paradox depends on whether they can reach a strategic understanding and change their conception and mentality.

### *C o n c l u s i o n*

China, Russia, and America are the three major powers in Central Asia. They have entered Central Asia and expanded their influence in different ways since the Soviet Union disintegrated and the Central Asian nations gained their independence in December 1991. Each of the three powers has its own vital interests, upon which it formed its own foothold and niches in the region. In the wake of 9/11, the United States' presence in Central Asia loomed particularly large as its military forces suddenly appeared in Central Asia, which led to immense geopolitical changes in favor of the United States' presence in the region. Notwithstanding, the presence of the three powers and the triangle posture have remained intact, and no one has been left out of the picture. Their presence in Central Asia is strategic and enduring.

The encounter among the three major powers, China, Russia, and the United States, in Central Asia poses the critical question of how they will build their interrelations. The question is not only relevant to the interests of each of the three powers, but also to the stability and security of the Central Asian region.

The Central Asia situation cannot but remind people of "the Great Game" played out in the region in the 19th century. The frequent appearance of the phrase "the Great Game" in the media recently is no accident. Quite a number of analysts have detected a shadow of the Great Game hovering in Central Asia and so are predicting that a new version of the game will occur in the region.

This worry is not entirely groundless. The U.S.'s long-term military presence in Central Asia will pose a geopolitical challenge to both Russia and China. In terms of strategic vision, Russia regards Central Asia as its own backyard and China sees it as its strategic rear area. Since the U.S. military deployment in Central Asia has a direct bearing on Russia and China's strategic visions, they cannot help but take the U.S.'s action seriously in strategic terms.

Reality is another reason to worry. After 9/11, Central Asia has become the region in which the military forces of the great powers have gathered. The U.S.-led coalition forces have established five military bases in Central Asia, and the number will likely increase. Russia has created its first military base in Kyrgyzstan in the name of the CIS Collective Security Treaty Organization and is seeking to set up a military base in Tajikistan, since it has already strengthened its 201st Russian motorized division in the republic. China has no military base in Central Asia, although it carried out the first joint cross-border military exercises with Kyrgyzstan in October 2002. Despite the fact that the military bases and military actions of the great powers are aimed at countering terrorism, they also create new grounds for competition. The size and number of the military bases and military forces of the United States and Russia gathered in Central Asia are unparalleled in other areas of the world. The concentration of military bases and military forces could turn into distrust and a source of conflict if no mutually acceptable reasons for their continued presence are presented as soon as the counter-terrorist mission in Afghanistan is finally over.

The key issue of the relations among China, Russia, and the United States concerning Central Asia is to prevent them turning into a "Great Game" and confrontation. The higher goal is to work out an institutionalized framework of cooperation. This presumption is not only feasible, but also desirable.

China, Russia, and the United States are not pursuing their personal goals in the region and do not want confrontation, which naturally contradicts the fundamental interests and needs of the three powers. This is an important condition preventing the three powers from coming to blows in Central Asia. Fur-



thermore, this is no longer the nineteenth century, the times have changed tremendously, making any great power confrontation along the lines of a "Great Game" totally out of sync with the spirit of our times.

China, Russia, and the United States share common interests, i.e. counter-terrorism, maintaining regional stability, and combating illicit drug circulation. This is an objective base on which China, Russia and the United States can build a cooperation framework. In fact, in their action against the Taliban in Afghanistan, the three powers have shown the precedence of their cooperation in Central Asia.

At least two obstacles should be obviated if cooperation is to continue.

- The first, everyone should reconcile themselves to the U.S.'s long-term military presence in Central Asia. The United States did promise not to retain a long-term military presence in Central Asia, and China and Russia do not want to see that either. However, the United States is obviously going to retain a long-term military presence in Central Asia. Acceptance of this fact is a critical condition for cooperation among the three powers in the region. But China and Russia cannot politically and psychologically accept the fact. It is more difficult for Russia to accept a long-term U.S. military presence in Central Asia, especially in light of the fact that the United States is penetrating into the Caucasus and other regions of the former Soviet Union and that NATO is enlarging to encompass regions next to Russia.
- The second, China, Russia, and the United States must find the right way to form a real mechanism for their cooperation. There are no trilateral channels or platforms for the three powers to hold a dialogue and establish cooperation. This is a critical obstacle to dialogue and cooperation. A relevant platform is an indispensable bridge for bringing them together. There are several alternatives: (1) the United States becomes an observer or interlocutor in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; (2) China becomes an observer or interlocutor in NATO's Partnership for Peace program and takes part in its actions together with Russia; or (3) all three powers find some common ground in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and NATO's Partnership for Peace program.

The trilateral cooperation process will be difficult, complex, and convoluted due to the contradictions and paradox between traditional and non-traditional security. In the realm of non-traditional security, China and Russia have common interests with the United States; but in the realm of traditional security, they have contradictions with the United States. These contradictions can only be resolved if the three powers change their conceptions and come to a common understanding of the need for the highest level strategy.