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Welcome to the new Great Game

The West is not exactly interested in encouraging an Arab Spring along the Silk Road.

Pepe-Escobar

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North Africa and Central Asia seem to share the same ills: dictatorships, widespread corruption, poverty, high youth unemployment, total media control and very limited political space for any opposition.

No wonder the initial thrust of the Arab Spring in North Africa - a popular struggle for democracy - scared the hell out of most governments along the Silk Road. More than democracy, what they saw was the spectre of Islamisation. Thus the blocking of Facebook and Twitter, the set-up of made-in-China internet filters - coupled with the absence of a pan-Central Asian broadcaster in the Al Jazeera model to spread the word.

Central Asian strongmen have reasons to look back in anger - and dread - to what's happening in Egypt and Syria. Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan and Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan have each been in power for 21 years now. Emomalii Rakhmon in Tajikistan has been president since the country's bloody civil war during the 1990s.

True, there was a political transition in Turkmenistan in 2007, when the flamboyant Saparmurad Niyazov died. But the snake continued to behave the same way under the new leader, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov.

The most complex case is Kyrgyzstan, which went through the dodgy 2005 Tulip Revolution and the 2010 anti-Tulip Revolution. It is now a multi-party parliamentary republic, but still mired in poverty, a serious schism between north and south, and the ethnic minefield of the Ferghana Valley.

Elsewhere, cosmetic reforms prevail. Parliament is slightly less cartoonish under Karimov - as it should be, in theory, under Nazarbayev.

But forget about free and fair elections, independent media and real multi-party debate. Uzbekistan could easily become a Central Asian Syria, with a civil war involving the Karimov system, the army, the radical, Taliban-aligned Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the secular opposition. As for the porous Tajik-Afghan border, it remains a glittering attraction for radical Islam.

Get me to my base on time

Central Asia is crucial because it's at the heart of Eurasia - and thus at the heart of the New Great Game, essentially pitting the US against Russia and China, with assorted minor players such as Iran, Turkey and Pakistan.

When it comes to hardcore New Great Game power plays, democracy is not even an afterthought. Washington seems to give the impression that Central Asia is a Russian - and also Chinese - zone of influence. Not really. Few prospects are more enticing for the US intelligence establishment than US military bases all across Central Asia.

Officials in Uzbekistan's capital left the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) in late June. The CSTO is a ten-year-old politico-military forum comprising Russia, Belarus, Armenia and, until this defection, the five Central Asian "stans".

Tashkent said it was because of "differences" over Afghanistan. The real reason, **according** to Central Asian expert Vadim Kozioulin: a complex negotiation with Washington to possibly readmit the US to the Khanabad military base, used by Russia since the US was kicked out by Karimov in 2005.

The Uzbeks would get a lot of goodies if the deal went through: weapons, tonnes of non-military equipment that otherwise would be left to rot in Afghanistan, and most of all, the status of US **"strategic ally"**.

Washington's key objective in all this is - what else - the progressive military encirclement of Iran. And then there's Tashkent's own objective: to torpedo Russian President Vladimir Putin's pet project of a **Eurasian Union**.

Tajikistan, for its part, pits Moscow against Washington around the Aini military airport, only 15km away from the capital Dushanbe. Tajikistan hosts Russia's 201st division, with more 6,000 men, on the largest Russian foreign military base in the world.

Washington is already in Kyrgyzstan via the small Manas base, near the capital Bishkek, crucial for the Afghan war. Yet Bishkek wants a lot more rubles for the rent of three other bases to Moscow.

The bottom line is that immensely corrupt Central Asian elites are salivating in anticipation of NATO leaving Afghanistan in 2014. Yet the US will somehow stay, with those fuzzy 20,000 or so "advisers". And for all these regimes, Washington holds the proverbial offer they can't refuse: political backing.

One thing is certain: Putin will make sure there will be hell to pay if any of them try to ditch Moscow.

Now for the real 'international community'

The New Great Game was in full swing when the presidents of China, Russia and four "stans" (minus idiosyncratic Turkmenistan) **gathered in Beijing in early June** for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit.

Crucially, the presidents of Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Turkmenistan and Mongolia, plus India's foreign minister, were also there. No better setting for the SCO to propose - via Moscow and Beijing - a completely different worldview from the West's.

So this, in a nutshell, is what a substantial section of the real "international community" - not that fiction brandished by Washington, London and Paris - thinks about key episodes of the New Great Game.

The SCO is totally against the US and NATO's missile shield scheme. As for Central Asian "stans", they better stay away from NATO: if there is any regional crisis, it should be solved regionally. The SCO wants an "independent, neutral and peaceful" Afghanistan (now promoted to the status of SCO observer); this is code for Russia and China doing everything they can to erase US influence over Kabul.

The SCO condemns Libya-style "humanitarian" interventions and unilateral sanctions. It privileges the old-school UN charter and international law - and also, by the way, a future reform of the UN Security Council. On Syria, the only solution is political dialogue - which for Moscow, sensibly, must also include Iran.

The SCO considers a possible strike on Iran "unacceptable". At the same time, crucially, neither Beijing nor Moscow would want to see a hypothetical Iranian nuclear bomb.

There will be increased economic co-operation among SCO member states. Future steps include an SCO Development Bank. Moscow remains the top trade partner of the Central Asian "stans".

And a very intriguing development: NATO member Turkey - part of the US missile shield network - was admitted as a SCO "dialogue partner". No admission, at least not yet, for both

India and Pakistan. Inevitably, in the near future, they will become full-time members, alongside Iran.

So this is not yet an Eastern NATO. Chinese news agency Xinhua, with deceptive understatement, stressed the SCO is a "partnership", not an "alliance".

What's blowing in the wind?

NATO, of course, has other ideas. It did invite four "stans" (minus, once again, Turkmenistan) to the Chicago summit in May. NATO has an even bigger desire than the SCO for "partnerships" - which, in NATO speak, means military bases.

To say that NATO and the SCO are on a collision course is an understatement. It's a long way since the SCO focus was only Islamic fundamentalism - as in the Taliban in Afghanistan. From now on, as Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made clear, the SCO will have a common policy for any crises in the region - and way beyond the region, for that matter.

The key local headache for the SCO to deal with will be Uzbekistan. Wily Karimov is hedging his bets like there's no tomorrow.

NATO's Northern Distribution Network (NDN) to Afghanistan involves Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. What the trio really wants is to profit handsomely from being transit countries. As NATO's hidden agenda is not really "security" in Central Asia but to counteract both Russia and China, the stage is set for epic bouts of hard bargaining.

What's clear is that in this new round of the New Great Game, the last thing the "democratic" West wants is to encourage some Arab Spring winds to hit the Silk Road.