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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Conflict, cooperation or competition in the Caspian Sea region: A critical review of the New Great Game paradigm

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ABSTRACT

This article critically reviews the New Great Game image of the Caspian Sea region and the assumptions, concepts, and mechanisms (revolving around actors, aims, and motivations) this image is based on. More specifically, this review essay answers the following questions: How does the academic literature interpret the impact of competition between great powers on social, political and economic developments in the Caspian Sea region? Which actors are presented as the dominant players? The essay also introduces the existing criticism of the New Great Game concept and alternatives to it that have already been put forward. By identifying the gaps and limits of existing scholarship, this article offers new avenues for alternative theoretical and empirical interpretations. More specifically, this article argues that the New Great Game literature promotes unsystematic and shallow discussion as it ignores and misunderstands historical, material, political, economic, and normative differences in the Caspian Sea region. Within this discussion, actors, interests, identities, social contexts, and principles are taken to be fixed, i.e. not prone to change or to any sort of adjustment.

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Introduction

Since the early 1990s, the notion of the “New Great Game” has been used as a shorthand tool for explaining the competition between great powers over religious influence, military power, geopolitical hegemony and economic profit (e.g. the oil and gas industries, and transport) in regions such as, the Caspian Sea, the Arctic Sea, the Black Sea, and the South China Sea (Borgerson 2009; Clover and Hornby 2015; Kim and Eom 2008; Rinna 2013). Besides being written about in academic journals, the concept is also regularly used by popular media, such as Radio Free Europe, *Financial Times*, *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, due to its journalistic attractiveness (e.g. Bittner 2018; Norton-Taylor 2001; Pannier 2009). The basic premise is an argument that great powers compete with each other to establish their political, cultural and economic influence over particular geopolitical spaces or objects. This competition has also been called “the grand chessboard” (Brzezinski 1997, 64) and is understood as a zero-sum game or the re-establishment of

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China's and/or Russia's traditional domination or suzerainty over these regional seas (Swanstrom 2005, 581). Regional seas are often depicted as particularly important arenas of the great powers' competition due to their geographical location, natural resources and contested borders. In depicting them as such, the relevant literature has used the concept of the New Great Game as an explanatory paradigm to facilitate understanding of the political and economic developments in these arenas.

This article critically reviews the main theoretical and empirical works on the New Great Game. The latter mainly focused on the Caspian Sea region. This review is based on prominent academic journals, newspapers, reports and policy briefs. In doing so, the article will answer the following questions: What do authors mean by the (New) Great Game? Why do they use this phrase and what do they consider to be at stake? Is there a difference between "Old" and "New" Great Games? With the answers to these questions, I will turn to the Caspian Sea region and ascertain: How does the academic literature interpret the impact of competition between great powers on social, political and economic developments in the Caspian Sea region? Which actors are presented as the dominant players? Answering these questions offers a crucial insight into the relevant academic discussion, its logic and preferred vocabulary and it shows the main gaps and limits of the mainstream academic literature. More specifically, by identifying the gaps and limits of the existing scholarship, this article will offer new avenues for alternative theoretical and empirical interpretations.

This article uses the critical review approach. According to Pare et al. (2015), the strength of a critical review lies in its ability to highlight contradictions, controversies, or inconsistencies. In this way, it can constructively inform other scholars and strengthen knowledge development by giving a focus and direction to further improvements and refinement in a research field or topic (Pare et al. 2015). By using this approach, the following stages are adopted in this literature review. First, there is a large and mounting literature on the Caspian Sea in different languages other than English. Nevertheless, I have limited the scope of this study to only English-speaking publications. Second, a series of keywords (e.g. (New) Great Game, conflict, competition, rivalry, geo-economics and geo-politics) related to the Caspian Sea are identified and a search criterion for academic works established. To search for papers, the keywords needed to appear in the title of the work, in the abstract, or in the keyword list. Third, the databases in which to search for articles on the Caspian Sea were selected (e.g. Google Scholar, Scopus, Science Direct, and Social Science Citation Index and Taylor & Francis Online). These databases were selected because, firstly, they contain a large number of well-known journals of recognized prestige. In terms of search functionality, they offer the possibility to search simultaneously for keywords in an article title, abstract and keyword list. I collected the academic works on the (New) Great Game published between 1980–2019. Once the academic works have been identified, they are selected and put in order in accordance with established quality assessment criteria. Finally, the information was gathered and processed.

The article is divided into five sections. Following the introduction, the second section traces the evolution of the scholarly conception of the Old Great Game. The third section critically engages with the main theoretical and empirical arguments of the New Great Game. The fourth section introduces the existing criticism of the New Great Game concept and alternative concepts that have been put forward so far. In the concluding section, I will present the main findings.

The original concept of the great game

According to Fromkin (1980, 936) and Hopkirk (1990, prologue), it was a British officer, Arthur Conolly, who first coined the phrase “Great Game”. Conolly was sent to Bukhara by the East Indian Company to convince the Uzbek emir to side with the British against the Russians. However, the Uzbek emir imprisoned him for two months and then beheaded him. Later, a historian of the First Afghan War found the term “Great Game” in his diary and quoted it (Fromkin 1980, 937). However, the term only became widespread and popularised during the first years of the twentieth century after being used in the novel *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling, first published in McClure’s and Cassell’s magazines in 1900.¹ Considering this, it can be argued that the concept is originally based on a fictitious novel or imaginative fiction, on which some authors later based their academic discussions.

The relevant literature follows the classical realist line of reasoning which claims that territorial control, power, prestige, economic profit, and imperial domination were the main aims of the Old Great Game (Campbell 2014; Deutschmann 2014; Fromkin 1980; Hopkirk 1990; Ingram 1980; Morrison 2017; Sergeev 2013; van der Oye 2014; Williams 1980). More precisely, this literature holds that the Old Great Game is a narrative of sovereign states’ political struggle for power. Great powers, namely the British and Russian empires, are presented as the dominant actors from an empirical perspective, while local actors – emirs, khans, emirates, khanates and their peoples – were marginalized and sidelined in the academic discussion. Local actors, such as the Emirate of Afghanistan, the Khanate of Kokand and the Emirate of Bukhara, are included only in terms of their aspirations to join the permanent players’ military, political and economic blocks in situational coalitions to achieve their own goals. In terms of geographical scope, the literature focuses on Russian and British imperial dominance in Central and Southeast Asia.

Much of the existing empirical work on the Great Game relies on historical studies, biographies, monographs, and archival documents (e.g. diplomatic correspondence) from Russia, Britain, India and Uzbekistan (Campbell 2014; Morrison 2017; Sergeev 2013; van der Oye 2014; Williams 1980). Each relevant empirical work uses these diverse sources to cover a particular timeframe, a war or an event that transpired between Britain and Russia (from 1800 until 1907). In light of this, the relevant scholarship adduces various reasons to explain the rivalry between Britain and Russia. However, focusing only on the British–Russian rivalry, the relevant literature neglects and over-simplifies the complex web of alliances and conflicts that existed between Russia, the Kazakhs, and the Central Asian khanates.

The empirical literature should be divided into two bodies of scholarly works in accordance with the opposing and diverse conclusions they arrive at about who the aggressor was in the Old Great Game. The first body of scholarly works argues that the Russian authorities aimed to extend Russia’s territorial, economic and political control, while challenging British imperial dominance. According to this body of work Great Britain was possessed by the fear that Russia would march across Asia to attack the British position in India throughout the nineteenth century. Fromkin (1980, 939–940) argues that Britain had no less than five reasons for opposing the continuing Russian expansion: (1) the expansion would change the balance of power in the world by making Russia much stronger than the other European powers; (2) it would facilitate a Russian invasion

of British India; (3) it would motivate India to revolt against Britain; (4) it would cause the Islamic regimes of Asia to collapse which in turn would lead to the outbreak of a general war between the European Powers; and (5) it would threaten British trade with Asia and the naval communication line upon which Britain's commercial and political positions in the world depended. Queen Victoria tellingly claimed that "it is a question of Russian or British supremacy in the world" (Fromkin 1980, 940).

Similarly, Cooley (2012, Ch.1) adds that in response to the Russian expansion, Great Britain formulated a strategy to resist the Russian influence, which included contesting frontier areas, persuading local rulers to side with Great Britain, and deploying a vast network of secret agents to gather intelligence. To prevent the Russian expansion, Britain first attacked Afghanistan in 1838, which is called the First Anglo-Afghan War of 1838-42. Later, Russia encouraged Persia to move against Afghanistan in response to this war, which led to the Anglo-Persian War of 1856-57. More concretely, Britain attacked Persia to prevent the Persian expansion. In 1878 Britain attacked Afghanistan for a second time in response to the Russian imperial army's annexation of the Central Asian khanates of Kokand and Bukhara (Cooley 2012, Ch.1; Hopkirk 1990, Ch.19). When Russian border patrols reached the Afghan frontier, during the Penjdeh crisis of 1885, Britain and Russia nearly went to war with each other (Fromkin 1980). The Old Great Game ended in 1907 with the signing of the *Anglo-Russian Convention* (Hopkirk 1990; Sergeev 2013, Ch. 6). In August of that year, this historic convention was signed in Petersburg by Count Izovolsky and Sir Arthur Nicolson, the British ambassador (Hopkirk 1990, 427). However, considering these historical facts and arguments, it can be argued that this first body of scholarly works on the Old Great Game implicitly presents Russia as the aggressor and Britain as a responding actor in it. The reason for this is that the relations between both countries have mostly been examined through British and other Western sources. This body of scholarly works mainly focused on the one-sided, British perception of the conflict and rivalry. In doing so, this group ignores the Russian intentions, the importance of Central Asia to Russian history and local interpretations of the Great Game conquest.

By contrast, the second body of scholarly works has tried to address this problem of one-sidedness by using Russian, Uzbek and the Soviet Union archives (e.g. Malikov 2014; Mamadaliev 2014; Morrison 2017; Sergeev 2013). In 2014 the journal *Central Asian Survey* dedicated a special issue to the Russian conquest of Central Asia.² By studying different episodes of the conquest through archival documents, the issue outlines Russia's motives and ideologies and, above all, the meaning and experience of the conquest from a Central Asian perspective. This body of scholarly works collectively argues that the main aim of the Russian expansion was to strengthen its borders, break cultural resistance against Russian assimilation and prevent the growing British influence from reaching the khanates in the region (Gorshenina 2014; Mamadaliev 2014). According to the relevant works, the Russians were worried about British economic imperialism, which threatened to push Russian goods and merchants out of Central Asia. This second body of scholarly works thus shows that there was outside pressure on Russia to define its political and economic spheres of interest in Central Asia to its own advantage (Williams 1980). Despite this contribution, one may argue that similar to the western perspective espoused by the first body of scholarly works, the second body one-sidedly describes Russia as a responding actor and Britain as an expansionist empire. In this regard, it can be argued that the

relevant literature as a whole offers both British and Russian perspectives of the Old Great Game. However, one needs to read works espousing both perspectives in order to understand the full picture. Moreover, while the relevant works mainly focus on these two empires, scant attention has been paid to the local actors' motivations, roles, and responses to the British–Russian rivalry in Central Asia.

Overall, considering the discussion above, it can be argued that the term Great Game has been used to describe the competition and rivalry between two empires, Russia and Great Britain. According to the relevant scholarship, the goal of the original Great Game was to extend and preserve Russian and British imperial dominance in politics as well as economics in Central and Southeast Asia. In doing so, these empires mainly pursued military alliances and strategies to achieve their goals. To achieve their long-term goals, both empires used local actors and neighbouring empires such as Persia as part of their Great Game strategies. However, the relevant authors do not explain why they prefer to use the term “Great Game” or what the theoretical or analytical advantage of using the term in their discussion is. This gives the impression that the term is only used by the relevant literature because of its journalistic appeal or literariness rather than its analytical or theoretical value. This is an issue because the lack of analytical value makes it difficult to determine its conceptual utility, methodological choice, patterns, empirical categories, and the scope of its analysis. Therefore, it can be argued that the relevant literature prefers to use the Great Game metaphor because of its value as a kind of intuitive shorthand. Despite its journalistic appeal, it can be argued that the Old Great Game actually took place because in the nineteenth century Russia and Great Britain confronted each other both directly, in military altercations, and indirectly. With this in mind the main question becomes whether and how the New Great Game is connected to the Old Great Game.

From old to new great game

Actors

The contrast between the actors that are said to be involved in Old Great Game and the New Great Game is one of the most striking differences between the two. Like the literature on the Old Great Game, the scholarship on the New Great Game views external great powers as the main competitors in the game. In the New Great Game these permanent players are the European Union (EU), the US, Russia and China (Alam 2002; Karasac 2002). Unlike the literature on the Old Great Game, however, the literature on the New Great Game (in the Caspian Sea region) considers regional powers, such as Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia each with their own aims, objectives and methods of attaining them (Sheng 2017). These regional powers are seen to join the permanent players' political and economic blocks in situational coalitions to achieve their own goals. Examples of these coalitions from the existing scholarship are Iran, Russia and Armenia contra Turkey, the US and the EU; Russia and China contra Turkey and the US; Iran and Russia contra the US and the EU (Kleveman 2003; Khanna 2008; Rywkin 2004; Scott 2008; Swanstrom 2005). This means that the relevant literature recognizes local actors as part of the New Great Game, which in turn means that the discussion is more comprehensive. However, similar to the Old Great Game,

the literature on the New Great Game is also state-centric because non-governmental actors are neglected. In contrast to the Old Great Game, the scholarship on the New Great Game does not include South Asia. Rather it considers the Caucasus and Central Asia as the main regional areas of the great power competition.

In discussing its main players, the literature on the New Great Game should be divided into two bodies of works based on the diverse and opposing assumptions. The first body of works explains the competition and rivalry as mainly existing between the great powers, e.g. the US, China and Russia (Alam 2002; Flikke and Wilhelmsen 2008; İşeri 2009; Khanna 2008; Kim and Eom 2008; Kubicek 2013; Swanstrom 2005). In doing so, this literature recognizes the local actors as “primitive states” (Khanna 2008, 93). Similar to the literature on the Old Great Game, local states and their peoples are marginalized or ignored completely in this body of works. For example, Swanstrom argues that “the principal actors today are China and the US, especially following the US intervention in Afghanistan. Neither China nor the US is concerned over Russian pressure in the long term, since they know Russia has severe economic and social problems of its own to deal with (2005, 581).”

It is apparent that China has begun to use financial means to make the Central Asian states more dependent on it, a dependence in terms of gas and oil as well as political and military cooperation (Swanstrom 2005). Similarly, Rywkin (2004) argues that the New Great Game is between the US and Russia. All eight republics of Central Asia and the South Caucasus need good relations with both Russia and the US in order to ensure their independence and peaceful development in the twenty-first century (Kim and Indeo 2013). Nevertheless, despite their contribution, this body of works presents oversimplified conclusions, as they do not offer a new way of understanding the regional dynamics. More concretely, this group neglects that times have changed since the Old Great Game. States that were not around in the nineteenth century emerged in the early 1990s, and they can follow different foreign policy directions, such as joining different alliances or intergovernmental organizations than they were expected to. Meanwhile, the political and economic costs of interstate wars have grown unaffordable. The inability to incorporate these developments shows that this body of works is written with a nineteenth century mindset and uses a “one size-fits-all” toolbox to view current developments and events which are far more intertwined and co-influential than those in the Old Great Game.

In contrast to the first group, the second body of works advances the debate by recognizing the role of regional actors, such as Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Iran, Turkey and Turkmenistan (Collins and Bekenova 2017; Edwards 2003; Kavalski 2010; Kubicek 2013; Orazgaliyev 2017; Smith 1996). This body of works advances the New Great Game argument while also recognizing the influence of newly independent states and regional powers. This advancement allows to understand how and in what way the local powers (e.g. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan) play a role in constructing a framework for interaction and articulating new interests and norms in the Caspian Sea region. According to Kanet (2010, 81) “the local states are not mere pawns in the hands of the great powers. In fact, local leaders have been able to use their command of energy resources, their location and other factors to play off the outside states to their own advantage.” They are their own actors who can play the game for their own advantage and out of their own motivation and self-interest (Collins and Bekenova 2017). Denison argues that

“newly independent regional states rapidly moved from being consumers of externally constructed geopolitical plays to a position of agency, thus the West’s protectionist work is done in the region. The sovereignty of the region’s states is established and unlikely to be reversed (2012, 148).”

According to the relevant works, the dynamics of the New Great Game allowed Central Asian and Caspian elites to play off external actors against each other. The local actors have developed closer ties with Washington when needed and they have moved away towards Moscow or Beijing when their threat perceptions changed (Collins and Bekenova 2017). For example, according to the second body of works, the composition of interests of the Azerbaijani oil consortia are not only a direct result of economic forces, but also the result of a very deliberate weighing-up of Azerbaijani foreign policy interests (Orazgaliyev 2017). In the same vein, Kennedy (2010, 132) finds that “power has shifted from outside actors to Kazakhstan itself as the government handles effectively external alternatives (China, Russia and the West) and uses interest in its petroleum resources to bolster its international role.” In other words, the countries in the region try to preserve the balance between external powers to satisfy their own economic and political interests.

Overall, the current scholarly debate on the New Great Game recognizes local states as well as external powers as actors. However, following the recognition of the local states as actors, the literature has failed to move one step further to include actors besides and beyond states in its examination of this New Great Game. As a result, the rest of the players again are side-lined. States are still presented as the main players and the rest – companies, banks, financial institutions, and NGOs – are only ever considered tools of the states. Scant scholarship has been devoted to the motivations and preferences of actors besides or in spite of states, such as, companies, financial institutions, lobby groups, banks, NGOs and intergovernmental organizations. For example, Ismailzade argues that

Putin has actively used energy companies as a tool to promote a ‘liberal empire’. For this purpose, energy giants such as RAO-UES, Gazprom, Rosneft and Transneft – controlled by the Kremlin – became the harbingers of a new Russian policy in the Caucasus. This policy has consisted of obtaining as many local energy assets as possible across the Former Soviet Union, thus placing the Caucasus republics into a position of economic, and thus political, dependence on Russia (2006, 2).

In this sense, some of the New Great Game scholars do discuss the influence of non-governmental actors, albeit only superficially and only because for them these non-governmental actors represent states’ national interests. Additionally, little academic literature has been devoted to the technical, social, diplomatic, security, and networking power of other actors. The literature fails to see, for example, how the network of different financial institutions and NGOs with differing interests autonomously coordinated regional developments.

The objective of the new great game: survival of the fittest

Transnational infrastructures

According to the relevant literature, the first aim of the states engaged in the New Great Game is controlling the transnational infrastructure of the region (Alam 2002; Amineh 1999; Blank 2004; 2012; Karasac 2002; Kubicek 2013; Labban 2009; Monshipouri 2016;

Uddin 1997). Because the Caspian Sea is landlocked, it is difficult to export the resources extracted from it to global markets. One of the important ways of exporting goods is through transnational infrastructure, that is, through pipelines, railways, highways, and ports. Therefore, the questions of how infrastructure access is managed — what routes should be provided, who should be responsible for their construction and safety, who charges tolls and profits from them as well as the question of who composes the consortia and firms responsible for this — are portrayed as a whole subsection of the New Great Game hypothesis (Collins and Bekenova 2017; Dodds 2005; İşeri 2009; Karasac 2002; Smith 1996; Stegen and Kuszniir 2015). Thus, events like building of gas or oil pipelines between Azerbaijan and the EU, Kazakhstan and Russia, or Turkmenistan and China have been framed as a rebalancing of forces between these great powers.

The proponents of classical geopolitics have portrayed the process of planning and constructing transnational infrastructure projects, namely the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) the Southern Gas Corridor, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and the Baku International Sea Trade Port, as the new round of the Great Game in the Caspian Sea (see e.g. Alam 2002; Bayulgen 2009; Cohen 2002; Economist Intelligence Unit 2013; Karasac 2002; Kim and Eom 2008; Kober 2000). In this conception of the New Great Game, Russia and Iran are depicted as the main opponents to the development of the pipelines because these infrastructures are viewed as a way to avoid Russian and Iranian infrastructural imperialism and its monopoly on infrastructure. The US, Turkey and the EU are described as saviours of local actors on the other hand, because they are taken to be the alternative to Russian and Iranian imperial plans. In the New Great Game scholarship, Russia, Iran and Armenia are claimed to be among the main causes of almost every technical, economic and political problem (see e.g. Frappi and Valigi 2015; Kober 2000; Lussac 2008; Rukhadze 2016; Rzayev and Huseynov 2018). Absurdly, those projects are all different, but the proposed arguments are the same.

For example, Kuszniir (2013, 5) argues that “Russia will not renounce its own position in the region and will use different methods of pressure (cultural, political and energy leverage) on gas producing countries and the transit country Turkey.” Along the same lines, Dodds (2005) described the Caspian Sea basin as part of a gigantic strategic triangle (along with the South China Sea and West Asia) that would come to shape the patterns of potential (resource) wars in the twenty-first century. According to existing literature, a notable development in this new round is that besides Russia and Iran, China now plays a main role in these transnational infrastructure projects. The reason for this is China’s “One Belt One Road” project. The Caspian Sea countries invested billions of dollars in transnational projects to connect Asia to Europe. While supporting the idea of great power competition in the Caspian Sea, Yenikeeff (2011) argues that “in this new game Russia prefers the active involvement of China, rather than that of the EU and the US, because Russia views China as a partner against EU-US bloc.” Therefore, according to scholars advancing the New Great Game reading, the new round is a competition between two blocks: Russia, China and Iran contra the EU, Turkey, the US and Azerbaijan (Kuszniir 2013).

What these scholarly works have in common is that they constantly ask how power politics influence transnational infrastructure and how regional conflicts threaten infrastructure. Scant scholarship has been devoted to the effects of transnational infrastructure projects on the strategies of regional cooperation and exchange. The New Great Game

literature constantly predicts war and conflict in the long term and is unable to explain the peaceful developments and exchanges in the Caspian Sea. During the planning and construction phases of the BTC and the BTE pipelines, for example, the relevant literature was mainly pessimistic and sceptical about the potential for a successful construction of the pipelines because of conflicts in Chechnya, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and the uncertain legal status of the Caspian Sea (Alam 2002; Cohen 2002; Karasac 2002; Kober 2000). According to Cohen,

Iran also is carefully expanding defence ties with Armenia, a country technically at war with Azerbaijan. With Iranian instigation, Armenia would be capable of disrupting and threatening the Baku–Tbilisi–Supsa and future Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipelines, since a part of their route is located less than 30 miles from the Armenian–Azerbaijani ceasefire lines (2002, 5).

The regional conflicts (e.g. Nagorno-Karabakh) are still there and they have not been solved yet. For example, the BTC and the BTE became operational in 2006, which is more than a decade ago, but the New Great Game literature grew remarkably silent after 2006. Despite these persistent threats, the regional countries have continued their projects and international actors have invested billions in the regional infrastructure projects. Life continues in the region in spite of the existing security risk. The relevant literature consequently does not explain what the salient patterns of cooperation – despite putative threat levels – actually are.

Environmental conflicts

The literature divides environmental resources into two main groups: renewable (e.g. land, forest, water, fish, caviar) and non-renewable resources (e.g. oil, natural gas, diamond and gold). According to the literature, the second goal of the states engaged in the New Great Game relates to politics of non-renewable resources and who controls how much of them (Alabi 2013; Labban 2009; Monshipouri 2016; Uddin 1997). By using the scarcity framework, the relevant literature argues that environmental competition has intensified in recent times due to the rapid growth of the influence of great powers, which has increased the demand for the non-renewable natural resources, primarily oil, natural gas, gold, and diamonds (Diehl and Gleditsch 2001; Moyo 2012). More concretely, the relevant literature argues that the Caspian Sea environmental resources (oil and natural gas) are one of the main reasons for competition and rivalry between external great powers, such as the US and China, and regional ones such as Russia, Turkey and Iran (Borgerson 2009; Klare 2001; Moyo 2012). Because of the landlocked nature of the Caspian Sea, it is extremely difficult to export natural gas and oil to external markets. In light of this, the regional powers compete to control the infrastructure facilitating the export of these resources. Therefore, works on the New Great Game argue that the essence of the entire geopolitical competition is creating an uninterrupted flow of oil from the region to Western energy markets. For the Western great powers this means restricting the Russian and Iranian monopoly on the search for oil and gas fields and their exploitation (Karasac 2002; Kubicek 2013).

To support these arguments, the relevant academic works from the early 2000s constantly exaggerated the natural resource reserves of the Caspian Sea. When comparing the Caspian Sea with the Middle East, the literature depicted Caspian natural gas and oil reserves as an alternative source of fuel large enough to save the world (Alam 2002).

In the early 2000s, the relevant literature tended to cite reserve figures that range from optimistic to unrealistic. The most commonly used estimate for the region's oil reserves is 200 billion barrels, with no distinction made between "proven" and "possible" reserves (see e.g. Alam 2002; Bahgat 2003; Jaffe and Manning 1998; Kim and Blank 2016; Ruseckas 1998). This exaggeration might seem unimportant but it has created a false image of the Caspian Sea and increased international attention to it.

Lastly, the New Great Game literature sees the way environmental issues were handled mainly to support its geopolitical arguments and power politics. For example, Ismailzade (2006, 22) argues that the BTC project was hindered or postponed because environmental issues were raised. Many consider Russia to be behind these environmental protests or obstacles, as it seeks to stop the regional projects.³

Naval advancement

Military security is portrayed as another goal of the states engaged in the New Great Game. The topic has gained prominence since the early 2000s due to several reasons, such as the uncertain legal status of the Caspian Sea, the 9/11 attacks and subsequent US intervention in Afghanistan, the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) program and regional ethnic conflicts. According to the relevant literature, one of the main reasons the states involved had for building up their naval forces was the uncertain legal status of the Caspian Sea.

Alam (2002, 22) argues that "there are two burning issues in the Caspian Sea Basin—the legal status of the Caspian Sea and the ethnic conflicts. These two sensitive issues can at anytime jeopardize the security of the region. Thus, these issues should be properly and carefully resolved." Similarly, Haghayeghi (2003, 36) claims that "Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have small naval forces but are increasing them as the legal status of the Caspian Sea continues to be contested." According to these authors, the increase in military movement corresponds with the rising tension about the uncertain legal status of the Caspian Sea. The relevant scholars argue that Russia and Iran are by far the most dominant naval powers in the region and have already shown a willingness to use their military might to intimidate their neighbours (Karasac 2002; Saivetz 2003; Shlapentokh 2013). It has been argued that "Russia would engage in war with Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, if its interests were ignored" (Shlapentokh 2013, 155). In light of this, the relevant literature takes the build up of naval forces to be one of the ways in which littoral states to protect their legal status in the Caspian Sea (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2009; Shlapentokh 2013).

Furthermore, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks and the subsequent American-led military action in Afghanistan, the whole question of a New Great Game was revisited because following the 9/11 terror attacks, the Caspian Sea came to be considered a strategically important sector for NATO (Alam 2002). With the signing of the PfP, NATO has sought to set up close military relations with Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan.⁴ Laruelle and Peyrouse (2009) propose a number of reasons for these Western military activities in the region. First, they argue that the integrity of the newly independent states might be threatened by Moscow and Tehran because of the presence of Russia and Iran, which would make the area susceptible to instability in the long-term which would in turn be detrimental to Western interests. Second, they state the security of American companies participating in international consortiums exploiting Azerbaijani and

Kazakhstani oil has to be ensured. Lastly, the security of eastern Turkey and the export routes from the Caspian to the Caucasus and the Black Sea requires Western supervision.

In short, almost every argument of the New Great Game literature is based on the myth of absolute state sovereignty and state-centric geopolitics based on constant fear and preparation for war. However, this (mainly pessimistic) scholarship neglects how times have changed between the 19th and twenty-first century and that the attitude towards warfare has changed. Up to the First World War, waging a successful war was seen as the highest goal for rulers. If they wanted to claim a heroic legacy, they had to conquer new territories or regain those lost in previous wars. However, in the 21st century warfare is seen as a failure of diplomacy while avoiding warfare became the highest loftiest aim of diplomacy.

What is presented as new and who is presented as the winner?

Often the adjective “new” is added to distinguish contemporary changes, frameworks from older developments as seen in the usage of “new regionalism”, “new political science” and “new security studies”. “New” in “Great Game” is employed in the same way by scholars who try to explain the post-Cold War developments and changes in different regions. Considering both theoretical and empirical perspectives, it can be asked what is “new” in this Great Game. From a theoretical perspective, it can be argued that the existing works use a logic to explain the current developments that is similar to the logic used in the Old Great Game literature, e.g. the logic of foregrounding states, establishing monopolies over natural resources, pursuing power maximization, prioritizing their own survival, establishing cultural and religious influence over others and aspiring to military dominance and geopolitical hegemony. In other words, it is still coloured by a logic of quasi-Darwinian survival of the fittest among sovereign giants. The literature does not recognize the present-day complexities, recent geopolitical trends, the effects of globalization or the distinctions between the 19th and the 21st century. In this regard, it can be argued that it is misleading to call it “new” because there is nothing new in this conception of a so-called Great Game. The aim that scholars argue to be underlying this game is influence at political, economic, and cultural levels. Therefore, the New Great Game literature is not “new” because it fails to move away from orthodox and outdated state-centric assumptions and considers states and regions as given.

From an empirical perspective, the relevant literature describes almost every event, case or regional project, such as the construction of transnational infrastructure, legal disputes, environmental disagreements and transportation of natural resources, as part of this so-called New Great Game. Therefore, there is a clear logic in the New Great Game scholarship (as there was in the Old Great Game scholarship) but whether this logic accurately predicts conflict or cooperation is not clear. Additionally, unlike the Old Great Game scholarship, the New Great Game recognizes the role of regional states. Unlike the Old Great Game scholarship, however, what is described in New Great Game literature is purely the imagination of authors based on newspaper articles. The reason for this is that in the nineteenth century Britain and Russia had wars and clashes in Central Asia. However, since 1990s great powers have not openly clashed in the Caspian Sea. This means that the causes for events and occurrences that the Old Great Game literature described are more substantial than those the New Great Game literature describes. It also makes the arguments of the New Great Game literature less strong because they

give no real reason for this lack of conflict. By indulging in this, the New Great Game literature tends to interpret the present and future developments in terms of outdated nineteenth century insights rather than the twenty-first century condition of world politics.

The next question is who the winner of the New Great Game is. Unfortunately, there is no agreement between the different New Great Game scholars. The studies examining the outcomes of the New Great Game have generated a wide range of contradicting empirical findings, which do not allow for a clear-cut conclusion. Kavalski (2010) argues that no country has yet come out as the dominant force. The reason that no one force has yet become dominant despite the involvement of so many actors with diverse aims and interests, is that all of them prefer stability and peace in the region to war and conflict (Kavalski 2010; Smith 1996). According to Smith (1996) the players of the New Great Game, in particular Iran, Pakistan, India, Russia, and China, seek to promote stability in the region while expanding and protecting their own regional influence, unlike the players of the Old Great Game.

In contrast to these assumptions, Kazantsev (2008, 1084) claims that “up to the middle of 2006, Russia had achieved its aim to preserve its dominance of the region and restrict access of other powers.” He therefore considered Russia the winner of the New Great Game. Similarly, Stegen and Kuszniir (2015, 102) declared China and the Caspian Sea states themselves the winners of the New Great Game. The reason for this outcome is the irritating behaviour of other great powers, Russia in particular. These irritating behaviours included Russia’s aggressive interventions in Georgia and Ukraine, which decreased the trust that the Caspian Sea states had in Russian intentions. Similarly, the democratizing pressures of the US and the EU, which were taken to be a threat to the existing system of the Caspian Sea states, were considered irritating and were counterproductive to the US’ and EU’s aims of building influence in the region (Stegen and Kuszniir 2015).

These examples illustrate that the relevant scholars present different and contradicting findings, which makes it difficult to follow the debate or to see one systematic New Great Game discussion. These contradicting findings also illustrate that pessimistic vocabularies and assumptions dominate the scholarly debate about the future of the Caspian Sea region. Despite all the positive developments in the region, the New Great Game literature does not expect a peaceful resolution to the existing issues because rivalry, not cooperation, is presented as the essence of the region’s diplomacy.

Critiques

The arguments put forward in relation to the New Great Game reading of developments in the Caspian Sea region have been challenged by a number of scholars (e.g. Amirova-Mammadova 2017; Bayramov 2019; Bashir 2017; Casier 2016; Cooley 2012; Edwards 2003; Fettweis 2011; Grigas 2017; Jaffe and Manning 1998; Orazgaliyev 2017; Stulberg 2012; Trenin 2003). These critics question the theoretical, conceptual and empirical assumptions and relevance of the New Great Game literature mainly by using geo-economic and liberal theories and lines of reasoning.

From a theoretical perspective, these critics argue that using the toolbox of (neo)realism (e.g. state, power, geostrategic interests, rivalries, wars, and threat perception) is not sufficient to critically examine and explain the intertwined contemporary dynamics in the region (Edwards 2003; Orazgaliyev 2017). More concretely, the relevant literature

claims that the (neo)realist approach misses a number of fundamental tools and theoretical instruments to shed light on the more complex developments in the global arena. To counter this, critics offer insights from the liberalist theory as an alternative way to analyse the conflict, competition and cooperation between different actors, both regional and global. The liberalist insights include the influence of private actors, mutual interdependence, cooperation and economic power rather than just insisting on military causes for all developments.

Critics question the validity of the concept of the New Great Game in relation to the interactions in the Caspian Sea region from a conceptual perspective as well. According to some critics, today the number of external players is large and their aims are far more complex than the rather black-and-white imperatives of the Old Great Game, and there is no longer a convenient regional power vacuum for the external players to fight over (Bashir 2017; Casier 2016; Cooley 2012; Edwards 2003). Casier (2016) argues that considering the complexity of contemporary energy markets, the Western-Russian energy-related geopolitics should be viewed from a broader and more pluralist perspective that accounts for the preferences and interactions of private, governmental and individual actors. In doing so, a distinction should be made between collective and bilateral interactions in order to accommodate the fact that the process is not only about energy politics, but also about economics and environmental concerns and has to contend with social and cultural preferences as well (Casier 2016). It will also help scholars to see that energy politics is only one part of the complex geopolitical and geo-economic picture.

From an empirical point of view, critics argue that most New Great Game authors have a wrong picture of the Caspian Sea region because they use inadequate conceptual tools. That is to say, the New Great Game literature ignores cooperation in specific sectors when assessing the relationship between great powers and regional states (Bashir 2017; Casier 2016; Cooley 2012; Trenin 2003). One of these cooperation examples is the war on terror after the 9/11 terror attacks. Trenin (2003) explains that Russia and the US, contrary to what advocates of the New Great Game reading think, have been cooperating in their policies toward Afghanistan since the tragedy of 9/11, which made them allies in the war on terror. Russian President Putin initially agreed to allow US forces to establish temporary military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in support of its campaign in Afghanistan. Putin not only offered President Bush support in Afghanistan, which included providing valuable intelligence information, but raised no objection to a US military presence in Central Asia. According to Trenin (2003), the reason for this is that it became clear that Russia and America were facing similar challenges, and that their enemies were closely allied. Apart from that, Russia did not prevent the Azerbaijan's involvement in PFP.

Another example of this cooperation is the way energy companies have been allowed to do business in the region. More specifically, American energy companies collaborated with Russian companies in order to build the Caspian-Pipeline-Consortium (CPC) pipeline (Orazgaliyev 2017). Rather than competing over the routing of pipelines from the Caspian region, Western and Russian oil companies have cooperated on the commercially appealing and strategically important projects, such as the South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP)⁵ consortium in which Iranian, Russian and Western companies are shareholders (Edwards 2003; Orazgaliyev 2017; Trenin 2003).

According to Cooley (2012), many of Russia's policies regarding the Caspian Sea region have been tactical reactions to American and Chinese initiatives or reflections of the

broader state of its relations with these great powers. The interaction between the US, Russia, and China in the region has intensified over the decade, but zero-sum competition or the pursuit of relative gains have not been the exclusive or even the dominant form of great power interaction. At times their agendas have generated some flashpoints, tensions and direct retaliations, but for the most part they have coexisted in the region without nearly the level of conflict that New Great Game scholars perceive. According to Kaczmarek (2018) Russia and China deliberately try to avoid a clash between their economic initiatives (Silk Road and Eurasian Union) or an open rivalry. The reasons for this are that China is more interested in the practical benefits of regional cooperation and that cooperation is beneficial to Russia as it is struggling to maintain the image of a strategic leader in Eurasia.

Additionally, the relevant critics argue that the natural resource reserves of the Caspian Sea are exaggerated. According to Jaffe and Manning (1998), the idea from the 1990s that the oil reserves in the Caspian Sea region can offer long-term energy security to the West was a misconception. In this regard, the suggestions that these newly independent states could solve Western energy problems and give the West geopolitical advantages against Russia, Iran and China were exaggerated myths (Jaffe and Manning 1998). This misinformed estimation of the region's richness in resources also inflated the region's commercial and strategic significance and distorted the US foreign policy calculations, which led the US to risk ultimately unnecessary tensions with other actors, particularly Russia and Iran (Bashir 2017). In short, the energy reserves in the Caspian region are much less important than many political analyses have implied (Bashir 2017; Jaffe and Manning 1998).

Considering the latest findings, Grigas (2017), argues that since the 2010s, changes in the global gas markets, such as competition from Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) and the shale gas-boom have reduced the significance of Caspian or Central Asian gas for Russia, Europe and China. Both Europe and China now have a number of alternatives because of their gas diversification and supply strategy, especially in the form of LNG. Similarly, Rzaeva (2013, 2015) argues that the gas volume that the Shah Deniz (SD) consortium will be offering on the markets (10 bcm/a on the European market and 6bcm/a on the Turkish market) is near-negligible when compared to Gazprom's gas volume (130 bcm/a). Not even the SD as a whole can compete with Russian gas.

Finally, by using the geo-economic perspectives Stulberg (2012) argues that the main competition over Caspian oil reserves essentially boils down to commercial competition among energy companies and financial interests, as opposed to geopolitical rivalry among states. Scant attention has been paid to understanding the conditions under which a weakened Russian government can manipulate markets and domestic regulatory mechanisms in interdependent energy networks for the purposes of statecraft. The tone of Russian diplomacy has become decidedly pragmatic, with primary emphasis placed on securing Russia's competitive economic interests (Stulberg 2012). In the oil sector, neither Russia nor Iran wields sufficient geo-economic clout, not even combined, to shape the course of the search for oil in the Caspian region or the direction of its main exports. Russia's geo-economic shortcomings in the oil sector limit Moscow's ability to manipulate support for favoured oil exploration and exporting projects, or to impose restraint on regional energy diversification (Stulberg 2012). These geo-economic factors undermine the credibility of Russian threats to dictate proposals for extracting and

exporting Caspian crude oil or to obstruct alternative proposals. Similarly, Edwards (2003) claims that the import–export of oil and gas requires economic as well as political cooperation as there is no one state that is able to dominate the market. Even states that are supposed by New Great Game scholars to be directly competing for political influence—Russia and China for instance—work with each other. Russia may still view Central Asia and the Caucasus as lying within her geopolitical space, but it seems to have a willingness to accept that there can be no monopoly of influence on those states, either in the political or economic sense. In the same vein, Fettweis (2011) claims that unlike the (neo)realist expectations, neither of the two burning regional issues, that is the uncertain legal status of the Caspian Sea and the ethnic conflicts, have sparked conflict. Despite the *realpolitik* language of the great powers, they use economic tools to achieve their objectives or strengthen their positions.

In short, taking these critiques into account, it can be argued that the number of scholars who are sceptical about the theoretical, conceptual and empirical arguments of the New Great Game reading is growing. These scholars challenge the theoretical, conceptual and empirical findings of previous works by offering alternative views that take better account of the geo-economic situation.

Conclusion: where does the new great game literature lead us?

Kipling wrote his novel *Kim* based on his nineteenth century imagination and a series of anecdotes. Today's literature borrowed its central term from Kipling. The concept of the New Great Game has been structured and explained differently by different scholars at different times. However, the relevant literature does not recognize the fundamental difference between the nineteenth century state-centric system and the modern system of the twenty-first century. Many of the analyses that use this concept do so without any qualification or reservation. In the following, I focus on the persistent shortcomings that are characteristic of the studies discussed.

The first shortcoming is that the existing literature barely studies the Caspian Sea per se. The relevant works help us understand competition and rivalry in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, albeit imperfectly. However, the scholarship views the sea merely as a separating entity between the Caucasus and Central Asia rather than as a bridge that unifies the littoral states. As a result, the existing literature mainly explores either the relationship between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia as part of the South Caucasus on the one hand or the relationship between the five Central Asian states, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. The literature includes Russia and Iran in both regional discussions, since they share borders with both the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

The second shortcoming is that the relevant literature uses a mixture of unreliable information and evidence (e.g. the Caspian Sea's oil reserves measuring 200 billion barrels) to support its geopolitical arguments. In doing so, these academics neglect the intertwined connections between different issues in the broader picture, such as the legal status of the Caspian Sea, cooperation on environmental issues and transportation of natural resources. They are therefore unable to adequately explain new developments, changes and disagreements on these issues. This is the reason why the relevant scholarship is mainly pessimistic on the prospects for cooperation among the Caspian Sea states.

Additionally, the scholarship uses a fixed mindset revolving around power, sovereignty issues, forging alliances and insecurity to view all developments in the region. In doing so, a false image of the events in the modern Caspian Sea region has taken shape. Despite the distinctiveness of the issues faced by the states in the Caspian Sea region, their complexity cannot be understood in isolation. This interconnectivity means that the struggle in fixing one of these issues may unexpectedly impact the other issues just as cooperation on one issue may create suitable conditions for tackling other issues.

The third shortcoming is that the relevant literature does not explain why, when and how technical challenges lead to unanticipated economic, political and social consequences. Instead, the relevant scholarship has investigated every challenge exclusively along the lines of rivalries between great powers and from a (neo)realist perspective without concrete evidence addressing transnational infrastructure developments. In this discussion, states, primarily Iran, China, and Russia, have been identified as the driving force behind every development, political, economic, technical and social as well as environmental, and every setback in the planning and construction phases of transnational infrastructure projects. In the same vein, this scholarship expects transnational infrastructure projects to always trigger rivalries or even wars in the region following their construction (as was predicted for Nagorno-Karabakh) or even in their planning phase (as was predicted for the energy pipelines). In light of this, it can be argued that it is crucial to have alternative theoretical and conceptual frameworks to destabilise this oversimplified debate and offer a more nuanced reading of the issues surrounding transnational infrastructures.

The fourth shortcoming, and one that is in line with the previous shortcoming is that when addressing the impact of the infrastructural projects on the region, the existing scholarship (e.g. the scholarship with a geopolitical perspective and that with a geo-economic perspective), focuses mainly on conflict between states and/or companies while neglecting the material power of infrastructure. By explaining the role of the existing conflicts (e.g. Nagorno-Karabakh), the relevant works help us understand how they have influenced the regional infrastructure projects. However, despite the diversity of the existent literature, scant research has explained how transnational infrastructure influences the interaction between different actors, or what kind of changes infrastructure brings and how the BTC and the BTE influenced the relationship between the Caspian littoral states after its construction. It is necessary to consider these questions as they address the problems that arise when trying to think about the importance of transnational infrastructures.

The final shortcoming is that the relevant works neglect the increasing role of other actors, such as companies, NGOs, IGOs, and banks by putting them into a state-centric analysis. In the 1990s, the New Great Game literature viewed the great powers as the only players in the Caspian Sea. Since 2000 the newly independent regional states have also been recognized as the players of the new great game due to their economic and political positions. This advancement helps to understand the role of local states in constructing a framework for interaction and articulating new interests and norms in the Caspian Sea region. Nevertheless, this advancement of the debate has not moved forward. By using a purely state-centric model, it has become increasingly difficult to understand new developments, changes, disagreements and conditions in the Caspian Sea region. Until relatively recently, scant scholarly attention was paid to the significance of non-governmental actors as an explanatory paradigm to assist in understanding the geopolitics of the Caspian Sea region. For example, both the New Great Game literature and geo-

economic scholarship fail to explain the role of transnational energy cooperation within the littoral states. Or how non-governmental actors promote or undermine strategies of regional cooperation. It is important to answer these questions because transnational infrastructure projects involve other actors besides governments. To see the complete picture it is important to explain the role of these actors and their preferences.

Notes

1. It appeared as a book, namely Kipling, Rudyard. 1901. *Kim*. London: Macmillan and Co Ltd. Website for Magazine: http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/members/paper_richardskim.htm
2. See this link for the journal: <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/ccas20/33/2?nav=tocList>
3. Besides energy politics, competition for cultural and religious dominance is proposed as another facet of the New Great Game. Since the beginning of the 1990s, it has been widely anticipated that there would be a struggle for cultural and religious influence (pan-Turkism, pan-Arabism and/or pan-Islamism) in Central Asia and South Caucasus between Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India and Turkey (Ahrari 1994; Kim and Eom 2008; Monshipouri 2016). However, since cultural and religious aspects are outside the scope of this research and not relevant to the discussion, they are not included in the main discussion.
4. The Partnership for Peace (PfP) is a programme of practical bilateral cooperation between individual Euro-Atlantic partner countries and NATO. It was established in 1994 and allows partners to build up an individual relationship with NATO, choosing their own priorities for cooperation and pace of progress. Currently, there are 21 countries in the Partnership for Peace programme (as cited in NATO 2017).
5. The South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP) was built to export Shah Deniz gas from Azerbaijan to Georgia and Turkey. The pipeline starts from the Sangachal terminal near Baku. It follows the route of the BTC crude oil pipeline through Azerbaijan and Georgia to Turkey, where it is linked to the Turkish gas distribution system (BP Azerbaijan 2018).

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