


# Chapter 12

## The “Newest Great Game”: West–Russia Rivalry Over Trade Tariffs in Central Asia

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### ABSTRACT

*The ongoing rivalry among major powers in Central Asia is driven by the region's strategic importance and abundant natural resources. Recent tensions between Russia and the West over trade tariffs have led to the emergence of a new arena for economic and political struggle in the region. The present study examines the dynamics of this competition, which is referred to as 'The New Great Game' and analyses the impact of trade policies on regional alliances and economic dependency relationships. The imposition of protectionist tariffs by Russia, implemented through the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and the adoption of free trade and investment strategies by the West, targeting the region, are among the primary strategies that are deepening this competition. This article examines how Central Asian countries navigate great power competition through balancing strategies and explores the potential impact of global trade wars on regional economies. It argues that this contest will significantly shape the region's geopolitical future beyond trade tariffs.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, Central Asia has been the setting for the struggle between great powers for influence, becoming the focal point of geopolitical and economic

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competition. While the 19th-century 'Great Game' between Britain and Russia demonstrated the region's strategic importance, today this struggle is being reshaped by different actors and dynamics. China's Belt and Road Initiative, Russia's military and energy policies, and the West's democratic and free-market approaches have placed Central Asia at the center of the global power struggle. This multidimensional competition has turned into a race for political, military, economic and cultural hegemony.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union after the Cold War, a new geopolitical vacuum was created in Central Asia, leaving the region open to the influence of global powers. The current "New Great Game" involves not only the classic power struggle between states, but also economic instruments such as energy corridors, digital infrastructure investments and trade agreements. The economic influence of China, the security-oriented policies of Russia and the investment strategies of the West are forcing Central Asian countries to perform a multifaceted diplomatic balancing act. This process has also enabled the region's states to redefine their role in the international system as independent actors.

Central Asia's rich energy resources and geographical location make the region a critical center of global trade. One of the most prominent features of the 'New Great Game' is the struggle for control over energy transmission lines and logistics corridors. Russia's Eurasian Economic Union, China's Belt and Road Initiative and the US's regional economic cooperation programs constitute different fronts in the battle for regional influence. However, while this competition poses risks, it also offers Central Asian countries strategic room for maneuver. Through multilateral diplomacy, regional states are trying to balance their economic development and security needs while strengthening their position as active players in the struggle between global powers.

This chapter aims to analyze the evolving dynamics of the "New Great Game" in Central Asia by examining the strategies of major global actors and the responses of regional states. It seeks to highlight how geopolitical competition, economic initiatives, and security concerns intersect in the region, while also exploring the opportunities and challenges these dynamics create for Central Asian countries in asserting their sovereignty and shaping their international roles.

## **1.1. The Historical Context of the 'Great Game' and the Geopolitical Importance of Central Asia**

The competition between the various major players in Central Asia is symbolized by "game" theories of varying scales. The term "Great Game" is historically used to describe the British Russian struggle for influence in Central Asia. The origins of this enduring rivalry can be traced back to the Russian Iranian agreement of 1813,

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