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Matrioshka hegemony? Multi-levelled hegemonic competition and security in post-Soviet Central Asia

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Abstract. A multi-levelled hegemonic encounter has developed in Central Asia, in which a global hegemon, the USA; a regional hegemon, the Russian Federation; an aspirant sub-regional hegemon, Uzbekistan; and an emergent regional and global hegemon, China, co-exist within the framework of Central Asian security politics. Where these hegemons' interests do not conflict this can be characterised as a matrioshka model of hegemony: the different level hegemons can accommodate one another peacefully and where their interests coincide they can form alliances. The model of multi-levelled hegemony developed here highlights the simultaneous presence of competition and cooperation. This article explores the way in which the various bilateral hegemonic relations in the region also indicate that actual and emergent hegemonic states at different levels can cooperate *as hegemons* in order to challenge, or to respond to challenge, by hegemonic states at other levels. This helps to clarify the question of whether the increasingly competitive interaction between these states is likely to lead to conflict.

Introduction

This article examines the problem of hegemony in the context of contemporary security relations in post-Soviet Central Asia. It argues that an investigation into the under-examined phenomenon of regional hegemony allows the construction of a model of multi-levelled hegemony in which a global hegemon, the USA; a regional hegemon, the Russian Federation; an aspirant sub-regional hegemon, Uzbekistan; and an emergent regional and global hegemon, China, co-exist within the framework of Central Asian security politics. Where these hegemons' interests coincide, or at least do not conflict, this can be characterised as a matrioshka model of hegemony: the different level hegemons can accommodate one another peacefully and where their interests coincide they can form alliances. This multi-levelled hegemonic model, I argue, helps to clarify the important question of whether the increasingly competitive interaction of the USA, Russia, and China, in a region of critical security importance to all three states, is likely to lead to conflict, as well as elucidating the shifting bilateral and multilateral security relations in the region. Given the fact that the interaction of these states concerns questions not just of balance of power politics but also of interlinked military, economic, political, and cultural dominance of the region, this article's assumption is that the relationship between these states can usefully be understood – and is understood by at least some of the actors – as one of

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hegemonic competition. This article will therefore consider whether the theoretical literature relating to hegemonic competition and conflict can be applied to international political and security relations in Central Asia and, if so, whether this approach provides a useful basis for the analysis of twenty first century Central Asian security politics, which neither the 'Great Game' image of competition in Central Asia nor the literature on post-9/11 cooperation in the region adequately account for.[1]

While this article makes no claims for the exceptionalism of the Central Asian hegemony complex, it does argue that the particular security politics of this region in the post-Soviet period expose a so-far unexplored feature of the condition of hegemony, and thus have implications for the scope and application of theories concerned with hegemonic competition and decline in contexts beyond that of Central Asia.[2] Indeed, although the International Relations literature identifies the condition of regional hegemony, there has been no recognition of the fact that hegemons can co-exist at different levels of international relations, and that this is likely to have implications for security at some or all of these levels. In its focus on the critical importance of regional security dynamics to – and multi-levelled nature of – international relations, it shares some assumptions with Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), although it departs from it in its specific focus on the condition and consequences of hegemony in regional security politics.[3] Given the contemporary theoretical and policy-analytic interest in the condition and implications of hegemony, it is important to consider whether conceptions of hegemonic competition and decline require revisiting in the light of regional security practice and theory. The model of multi-levelled hegemony, which I develop here, highlights the simultaneous presence of competition and cooperation, while also giving both greater weight to subregional factors than the hegemony literature and greater weight to the interaction of hegemons at different levels than the regional security and related literatures have traditionally done.

[1] On the 'Great Game', see, for example, Amy Myers Jaffe and Robert A. Manning, 'The Myth of the Caspian "Great Game": the Real Geopolitics of Energy', *Survival*, 40:4 (Winter 1998–99), pp. 112–31; and Stephen Blank, 'The United States and Central Asia', in Roy Allison and Lena Jonson (eds), *Central Asian Security: The New International Context* (Washington, DC and London: Brookings Institution and RIIA, 2001), pp. 127–51. On post-9/11 Russia-US rapprochement, see, for example, Oksana Antonenko, 'Putin's Gamble', *Survival*, 43:4 (Winter 2001/02), pp. 49–60; Sarah E. Mendelson, 'U.S.-Russian Military Relations: Between friend and foe', *The Washington Quarterly*, 25:1 (Winter 2002), pp. 161–72; Aleksandr Iurin, 'Russia and U.S.: Partners, no matter what', *International Affairs* (Moscow), 49:2 (2003), pp. 40–5; Roy Allison, 'Strategic Reassertion in Russia's Central Asia Policy', *International Affairs*, 80:2 (2004), pp. 277–93; Lena Jonson, *Vladimir Putin and Central Asia; the Shaping of Russian Foreign Policy* (London & New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004); and Mikhail Troitskiy, *Institutionalizing U.S.-Russian Cooperation in Central Eurasia*, Kennan Institute Occasional paper 293 (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, 2006). The optimistic view of post-9/11 cooperation between Russia and the USA in Central Asia cannot account either for the complexities of the regional security picture or for the now overtly competitive nature of Russian-US security interactions in the region, as analysts are increasingly recognising. The 'Great Game' model relies on drawing a parallel with a single, nineteenth century case, which is neither analytically nor methodologically satisfactory.

[2] The applicability of a model of multi-levelled hegemonic interaction to regions outside Central Asia is beyond the scope of this article. The interaction of China, India, and the USA in South and East Asia is another possible case.

[3] Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

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Theories of hegemony

The concept of hegemony is one that resists precise definition; hegemony does not refer to a condition delimited by law, by the possession of specific material capabilities, or by clearly defined geographic or political boundaries. Although a state, a hegemon is more than one amongst many other like states. It is also more than the *primus inter pares* of a grouping of states; the hegemon is not 'equal' to other states in the international system because its role is qualitatively, not merely quantitatively, different from other states – as Robert Jervis notes, a hegemon's role in an international system is distinct from that of other states.[4] Critically, its material capabilities are not themselves a sufficient condition for hegemony; a hegemon also requires the intention to dominate. Robert Gilpin defines hegemony as 'the leadership of one state (the hegemon) over other states in the system'; Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye note that hegemony is present when 'one state is powerful enough to maintain the essential rules governing interstate relations, and willing to do so'; while Christopher Layne states straightforwardly that 'hegemony is about will'.[5] If a hegemon is more than one powerful state among many states it nevertheless exists in a less hierarchical relationship to other states than would an empire or world government, although in the way that it sets the rules of the international (and, in consequence, domestic) game for other states and introduces elements of *de facto* hierarchy into international relations, it has elements of both. Although a hegemonic state may also be an empire, as analysts agree that Britain was in the nineteenth century, its hegemonic role is distinct from its imperial role, since it does not exercise any formal political authority over other states; it is also not a world government for the same reason, and because hegemonic states have not, historically, extended their influence over the entire globe – hegemony is thus, as Layne notes, 'a relative, not an absolute, concept'.[6]

The definitional uncertainty surrounding hegemony has resurfaced in new ways in the context of post-9/11 US foreign policy. In contrast to standard usage, a number of policy makers, commentators and academic analysts have used the terms 'hegemony' and 'imperialism' more or less interchangeably. Joseph Nye, for example, uses the term hegemony to describe both an assertive, imperialist agenda of global scope promoted by sections of the American political elite and a more generalised aspiration to regional leadership, while Robert Jervis discusses US hegemony in the same terms as the Roman and British empires.[7] Jakub Grygiel's observation that 'there is no agreement as to whether the US is a hegemon, determining the rules of

[4] Robert Jervis, 'The Remaking of a Unipolar World', *The Washington Quarterly*, 29:3 (Summer 2006), pp. 7–19, 14.

[5] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 116n; Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, 3rd edn (New York: Longman, 2001), p. 44; Christopher Layne 'The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The coming end of the United States' unipolar moment', *International Security*, 31:2 (Fall 2006), pp. 7–41, 12.

[6] Layne 'The Unipolar Illusion', p. 11.

[7] Joseph S. Nye Jr, 'The American National Interest and Global Public Goods', *International Affairs*, 78:2 (2002), pp. 233–44; Jervis, 'The Remaking of a Unipolar World', especially p. 13. Nye comments that 'some in the current foreign policy debates look at the US preponderance in power and see a modern empire. For example, self styled ''neo-Reaganites'' advocate a foreign policy of ''benign American hegemony'' ' (p. 235). Nye also refers to this group as 'the hegemonists' (p. 238); his reference to 'aspiring hegemons in key regions' (p. 241) implies a different understanding of hegemony. For a rather different understanding of hegemony, although one that also conflates hegemony and empire, see David Wilkinson, 'Unipolarity Without Hegemony' (1999) pp. 141–72.

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international relations, or an empire, shaping not only the international but also the internal situations of states' highlights this problem. However, Grygiel's definitional distinction between hegemony and empire conflates influence over the internal politics of states with an empire's formal authority over other states. This does not account for the impact of hegemonic behaviour on states' domestic politics, which is a consequence of the extent to which international rule-setting shapes domestic rules and proscribes domestic behaviours.[8]

Theories of hegemony have, even more than most areas of International Relations theory, developed in the context of, and with direct reference to, a specific case. In the 1970s and 1980s, hegemony as a subject of inquiry within (positivist) international relations was dominated by a preoccupation with the issue of US hegemony in the Cold War context, and specifically with the question of whether the US had entered a period of hegemonic decline.[9] Debates around US hegemony have been reformulated – both in a policy analytic and a theoretic context – in the post Cold War period and, in particular, in the period since 11 September 2001 (9/11), characterised by the USA's 'War on Terror(ism)'.[10] Unlike the previous period of engagement with the issues of hegemony, which focused on hegemonic weakness, decline and consequent international instability, however, the treatment of hegemony in the immediate post-9/11 context was largely focused on debates over the optimal mechanisms for power projection by the hegemon, and the possibilities for sustaining current dominance (a dominance that, as the first decade of the twenty-first century has advanced, has appeared less welcome to other international actors, even the US's allies).[11] As recent scholarly debate indicates, however, the issue of US decline has begun to re-emerge.[12]

Although the literature on global hegemony has moved on from the debates of the 1970s and early 1980s, aspects of the contemporary debate still reflect the theory of the earlier period. In particular, the assumption that hegemonic competition risks war has not been overturned – rather, the absence of any plausible challenger to the current global hegemon appears to have rendered this consideration redundant in (at

[8] Jakob Grygiel, 'Imperial Allies', *Orbis* (Spring 2006), pp. 209–21, 210.

[9] For a summary of the key aspects of the debate, see Michael Cox, 'The New Liberal Empire in the Twenty-First Century', *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 12 (2001), pp. 39–56.

[10] For pre-9/11 discussions see, for example, Bruce Cronin, 'The Paradox of Hegemony: America's ambiguous relationship with the United Nations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 7:1 (2001), pp. 103–29; Richard Ned Lebow and Robert Kelly, ' Thucydides and Hegemony: Athens and the United States', *Review of International Studies*, 27 (2001), pp. 593–609; G. John Ikenberry, 'Getting Hegemony Right – analysis of the United States as a ''hyperpower'' nation', *The National Interest* (Spring, 2001); Fareed Zakaria, 'The Challenges of American Hegemony: Then and now' *International Journal*, 54:1 (Winter 1998–9), pp. 9–27; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2001). Post 9/11 considerations of US hegemony include Barry R. Posen, 'Command of the Commons: The military foundation of US hegemony', *International Security*, 28:1 (Summer 2003), pp. 5–46; Michael Cox, 'American Power Before and After 11 September: Dizzy with Success?', *International Affairs*, 78:2 (2002), pp. 245–59; Anatol Lieven, 'The Secret Policeman's Ball: The United States, Russia and the international order after 11 September', *International Affairs*, 78:2 (2002), pp. 261–76; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, 'American Primacy in Perspective', *Foreign Affairs*, 81:4 (July/August 2002), pp. 20–33; Joseph Nye, *The Paradox of American Power*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Robert Jervis 'The Remaking of a Unipolar World', *The Washington Quarterly* 29:3 (Summer 2006), pp. 7–19.

[11] See, for example, Stephen M. Walt, 'Taming American Power', *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2005), and Layne 'The Unipolar Illusion'.

[12] Michael Cox, 'Is the United States in decline – again? An essay', *International Affairs*, 83:4 (July 2007), pp. 643–53 and M. J. Williams, 'The Empire Writes Back (to Michael Cox)', *International Affairs*, 83:5 (September 2007), pp. 945–50.

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least) the short term, in the view of most analysts. The reasons for the absence of a near-term, plausible challenger to the USA's position as global hegemon vary in the contemporary literature, but there is consensus that the overwhelming material (especially military) dominance of the US is the key underlying cause, and that the degree of this dominance is without historical precedent.[13] A more contentious explanation is that the benevolence of US hegemony is a key factor in the absence of any challenge, that states are not attempting to challenge or balance the USA because most states' interests are either the same as or not in conflict with those of the USA, and that consequently the USA poses a threat only to 'rogue' states.[14] This is not, of course, a universally-held view – Layne, for example, rejects this explanation, arguing instead that potential challenger states, constrained by the unprecedented power of the USA but facing only a non-existential threat from it, are driven to seek alternative methods of resistance, such as 'leash-slipping' in the security sphere.[15]

The argument regarding leash-slipping is a variation on a more widespread position that the failure to balance against, let alone challenge, the hegemon stems from lack of capability rather than lack of intention or motivation, and that consequently states are finding alternative ways to balance against the USA. The debate over the existence of soft balancing – identified by TV Paul as 'the formation of limited diplomatic coalitions or ententes, especially at the United Nations, with the implicit threat of upgrading their alliances if the United States goes beyond its stated goals' – is the most obvious aspect of this.[16] In a world characterised by overwhelming US dominance, soft balancing is held to have replaced more conventional challenges to the hegemon. It is not clear, however, in what ways soft balancing in this form is distinguishable from the early stages of more traditional forms of balancing. In any case, and as discussed below, challenge to the USA has already exceeded the limits of soft balancing in Central Asia; the direct nature of the challenge to the global hegemon in Central Asia stems from the fact that this is not an attempt to challenge for global hegemony but an attempt to resolve a complex series of threats and challenges in the context of regional and sub-regional hegemony. Analysts such as Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth have disputed the existence of any soft balancing against the USA; in contrast, others, such as Robert Pape, have argued that not only is soft balancing occurring, but that it is laying the ground for future hard balancing.[17]

Regional hegemony

A consequence of the near-exclusive focus on the global hegemon has been a comparative lack of engagement with some of the other aspects of the condition of

[13] Examples include Posen 'Command of the Commons' and Jervis, 'The Remaking of a Unipolar World'.

[14] See, for example, Keir A. Lieber and Gerard Alexander, 'Waiting for Balancing: Why the world is not pushing back', *International Security*, 30:1 (Summer 2005), pp. 109–39.

[15] Layne, 'The Unipolar Illusion'. Layne argues that the development of a European Union Common Foreign and Security Policy is an example of this form of emergent challenge to US hegemony.

[16] T. V. Paul, 'Soft Balancing in the Age of US Primacy', *International Security*, 30:1 (Summer 2005), pp. 46–71, 47.

[17] Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, 'Hard Times for Soft Balancing', *International Security*, 30:1 (Summer 2005), pp. 72–108; Robert Pape, 'Soft Balancing Against the United States', *International Security*, 30:1 (Summer 2005), pp. 7–45.

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hegemony. One such aspect is the phenomenon of regional hegemony. Regional hegemony has received limited theoretical consideration; the traditional hegemony literature often identified such states as 'rising challengers' to the global hegemon, rather than as states occupying a hegemonic position within a geographically limited area.[18] This focus is the result of the concentration on the USA in the context of the Cold War (where the USSR was represented as a hegemonic challenger) and after, when the absence of a challenge to US global hegemony became the focus.

More recent approaches, however, have addressed the issue of power and security dynamics at the regional level, two of which are important for the multi-levelled approach to hegemony suggested here. Buzan and Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) privileges the importance of regional powers as determinants in post-Cold War regional security, and also highlights the multiplicity of levels in international security politics; however, RSCT engages with the issue of hegemony and its impact on a multi-levelled international security environment only in passing – the condition and consequences of hegemony are not central concerns. It is notable, however, that Buzan and Wæver's specification that what they term 'superpowers' require both material capabilities and other states' acceptance of their superpower status indicates that superpowers have a high degree of similarity to other analysts' global hegemons; they also identify regional hegemony as a condition, in their discussion of centred Regional Security Complexes.[19] Thomas Pedersen's theory of 'cooperative hegemony' explores a key aspect of hegemony at the regional level; as the term suggests, of course, his focus is not on the possibilities of hegemonic competition, nor on the question of interaction between hegemons at different levels, although he notes both the importance of the extra-regional distribution of power and the perceived intentions of extra-regional powers as potential factors influencing regional integration.[20]

The perception evident in the literature that hegemonic challenge is no longer present, at least in the near term, is a function of most of the literature's focus on hegemony as a system level, global property; as is argued here, however, once hegemony is identified as a condition also occurring at other levels, the problem of competition re-emerges. It is then necessary to return to the earlier hegemony literature, which *does* consider the question of hegemonic competition and its

[18] For one approach to the issue of regional hegemony and regional disagreements, see David R. Mares, 'Middle Powers Under regional Hegemony: To challenge or acquiesce in hegemonic enforcement', *International Studies Quarterly*, 32 (1988) pp. 453–71. John Mearsheimer considers the condition of regional hegemony, but his focus is on its extra-regional consequences (on the relations between hegemons in different regions rather than on the relations between states within a region), while his bar for global hegemony is set so high that he is led to conclude that 'there has never been a global hegemon and there is not likely to be one anytime soon' (Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 41). Other analysts, with a more flexible interpretation of the concept of global hegemony, take a different view.

[19] On the requirements for superpower status, see *Regions and Powers*, p. 34; for mention of regional hegemony as a possible condition see, for example, p. 58 and the brief discussion of Uzbekistan in their discussion of Central Asia. This article parts company with Buzan and Wæver's theory in its primary focus on the issue of hegemony, rather than on regionality. Clearly, it also takes a different view about the boundaries and linkages of the sub-region of Central Asia – post-EU and NATO enlargement, it no longer seems appropriate to consider the Central Asian states as part of the same region as Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, but not China.

[20] Thomas Pedersen, 'Cooperative hegemony: Power, ideas and institutions in regional integration', *Review of International Studies*, 28 (2002), pp. 677–96. On the impact of extra-regional power considerations, see pp. 689–90.

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relationship to war. What this literature does not do, however, is engage with the condition of regional hegemony. Thus, contemporary discussions of global hegemony retain an underlying assumption about the risks of hegemonic competition developed in the earlier literature; the earlier literature on hegemonic competition does not focus on regional hegemony; and the recent work on regionality is not concerned with the question of hegemonic competition. In an international environment where not all hegemonic encounters are either cooperative or global, the questions thus remain of how theories of hegemony can account for actually or potentially competitive hegemonic encounters at levels other than the global, and how they account for an environment where the condition of hegemony is manifested simultaneously at a variety of levels and in a number of different stages of development (actual, declining, emergent).

This, in turn, leads to the issue of global, regional, sub-regional hegemony as like, and co-existing, conditions. If a state performs, in a limited geographic space, the functions that a more powerful state performs at the global level, it is important to consider how these two manifestations of the same condition (if that is what they are) relate to one another, not least because of the potential consequences for regional and global security of multi-levelled hegemonic competition. Thus, rather than thinking of hegemony as a single level condition, interactions between states in some regions, such as Central Asia, suggest that hegemony should be reconceived as a multi-layered concept, in which hegemony at one level poses challenges to, but does not necessarily erase, hegemony at another. Indeed, as discussed below, it can be argued that the presence of regional or sub-regional hegemons can, in some circumstances, be acceptable to or even desirable for the global hegemon. This, in turn, raises three questions – firstly, what the consequences are for regional security when hegemons at more than one level exercise their influence in a region; secondly, under what conditions hegemons of different levels can coexist peacefully; and, thirdly, whether this convergence of interests can be sustained over the longer term.

The answers to these questions rest on the more fundamental issue of whether regional hegemony can be understood to function in the same way as global hegemony, simply on a geographically more limited scale. If it can then the literature would suggest that regional hegemons should be as prone to challenge and decline as global hegemons, for the same reasons, and with the same consequences for regional security and stability as at the global level. An initial assumption – given that regional hegemony has generally been understood in this way – is that theories of hegemonic competition and decline should be applicable to regional hegemons, just as they are to global hegemons. Gilpin's classic study of hegemonic competition, argues that hegemonic competition with the potential to result in war will occur because:

> the rising state, as its power increases, will seek to change the status quo as the perceived potential benefits begin to exceed the perceived costs of undertaking a change in the system. [. .] response the dominant power counters this challenge through changes in its policies that attempt to restore equilibrium in the system. The historical record reveals that if it fails in this attempt, the disequilibrium will be resolved by war.[21]

[21] Gilpin, *War and Change*, p. 187. This explanation is also advanced by Robert Powell, 'Stability and the Distribution of Power', *World Politics*, 48 (January 1996), pp. 239–67. Lena Jonson also identifies Gilpin's analysis of hegemonic competition as a possible starting point for thinking about Russian responses to the US presence in Central Asia, although her consideration of this is

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Critically, Gilpin argues that 'the outbreaks of hegemonic struggles have most frequently been triggered by the fear of ultimate decline and the perceived erosion of power.'[22]

Although Gilpin considers the consequences of a competition for global hegemony, the same assumptions and predictions should be applicable to hegemony at any level, including the assumption that competition with the potential to lead to war between a declining hegemon and a rising challenger must be assumed to be possible in any hegemonic system. The starting assumption would, therefore, appear to be that if we accept that, under some conditions, such competition at a global level may lead to war, then we would also expect the same possibility of war in cases of regional or sub-regional hegemonic competition. Such an assumption, however, fails to account for the significant differences between hegemonic competition at a global level and at a regional level (or below). Most importantly in this context, the literature on hegemony makes two connected, unspoken assumptions: firstly that such competition takes place at a single level, and secondly that the 'challenger' in any given field of hegemonic competition is the historically weaker of the two states. In the case of multi-levelled competition, neither assumption necessarily holds, as the Central Asian case demonstrates.

Once the assumption is made that hegemony can, and does, exist at a regional as well as a global level, it follows that regional and global hegemony can exist at the same time. This in turn raises the question of how hegemons operating at different levels in the international system interact, as they must do eventually, if a global hegemon exists. Two types of multi-levelled hegemonic interaction appear possible. The first possibility is that global, regional, and possibly sub-regional hegemons either actively cooperate or do not compete because their interests do not conflict.[23] This may occur if the global hegemon has no interest in the region in question, or if their interests coincide. This condition could be described as matrioshka hegemony.[24] In the same way that Russian matrioshka dolls, identical in appearance and function but varying in size, can be accommodated within one another, so hegemons – functionally similar but operating at global, regional and sub-regional levels – appear to coexist. Because their interests do not conflict, the different level hegemons can accommodate one another peacefully – like dolls stacked inside each other – and, where their interests coincide, they can form alliances.

The second possibility, however – and one with which is this article is primarily concerned – is that the global hegemon has interests that conflict with the regional hegemon, and/or that the regional hegemon's interests conflict with those of the sub-regional hegemon. Any situation in which hegemons are observable at more than

necessarily limited in consequence of her focus on Russian foreign policy, rather than the impact of hegemony on regional security policy more generally (Jonson, *Vladimir Putin*, pp. 3–4 and 174–5).

[22] Gilpin, *War and Change*, p. 239.

[23] Similarly to Buzan and Wæver's 'sub-complex' category, I use the term 'sub-regional hegemon' to designate a hegemon existing in a distinct area of a broader region. In this context, Russia is a regional hegemon in the area of the former Soviet Union, excluding the Baltic States; Uzbekistan has been widely identified as a state with aspirations to hegemony within part of this region, post-Soviet Central Asia. Post-Soviet Central Asia can also usefully be understood as a sub-region of a wider Central Eurasia where China is generally identified as an emergent regional hegemon.

[24] This term echoes the concept of 'matrioshka nationalism', developed to describe the emergent nationalisms arising from the break-up of the complex national-federal structure of the USSR. See Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras (eds), *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

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two levels also raises the possibility of both hegemonic competition and hegemonic cooperation occurring in the same region simultaneously. This, arguably, is what has been occurring in Central Asia since the early 1990s, but most noticeably since 2001.

The second important implication of multi-levelled hegemony is that the global hegemon is not necessarily the hegemon in any given region. As implied by the model outlined above, where the interests of the global hegemon are not engaged in that region, the hegemons are not involved in competitive encounter; if the global hegemon asserts an interest in the region that does not coincide with that of the regional hegemon, however, hegemonic competition (that is, competition between hegemons at different levels) is likely to occur. This, logically, can only take the form of a challenge to the regional hegemon by the global hegemon; the global hegemon is thus, at the same time, a regional challenger. This is important because it blurs the previously clear distinction between hegemon and challenger, which in turn raises questions about the literature's various findings about the relationship between hegemonic challenge and war. Where more than two hegemonic actors are involved (for example, where a sub-regional hegemon also exists), this relationship becomes still more problematic.

Hegemons in Central Asia: Russia, the USA, Uzbekistan, China, and Kazakhstan

In the case considered here, prospective Uzbek sub-regional hegemony; declining Russian regional hegemony; US global hegemony; and emergent Chinese regional, and possibly global, hegemony have all been observable within the Central Asian security framework since the collapse of the USSR. While considerable attention has been given both to the impact of the USA's engagement with the region and to the regional hegemony of Russia in the context of this US engagement, the nature of relations been states in the region has not been understood as one of security competition between different level hegemons.[25] This has led to an underestimation of the stakes involved for the various states – the stakes are particularly high in a hegemonic encounter, as the hegemony literature demonstrates – and thus to an underestimation of the willingness of states, above all Russia, to act assertively to defend their interests.

Declining regional hegemon? Russia

Russia has played a hegemonic role in the Central Asian region in the post-Soviet period, even if, as has been widely noted, for most of the post-Soviet period the role has been that of declining hegemon.[26] Historically, Russia has been the dominant political, economic, and military power in Central Asia since the mid-nineteenth

[25] See, in particular, the 2004 *International Affairs* issue (80:3) on regionalism in Central Eurasia, especially Roy Allison, 'Regionalism, Regional Structures and Security Management in Central Asia', pp. 463–83.

[26] See, for example, Sherman W. Garnett, Alexander Rahr, and Koji Watanabe, *The New Central Asia: In search of stability; a report to the Trilateral Commission* (New York: Trilateral Commission, 2000); and Allison, 'Strategic Reassertion'.

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century, when the Russian empire expanded to absorb most of the region. Russia's post-Soviet relations with the Central Asian states have been characterised by a desire to retain its hegemonic position, in particular in the security sphere, but also by both an initial reluctance to engage actively in the region and a post-Soviet decline in economic and military capabilities, which contributed to the uneven character of Russian influence in the region and the inability to prevent growing engagement in the region by 'external' actors.

In the post-Soviet period, Russia has retained a variety of multilateral and bilateral links to the Central Asian states. In general, these formal and informal linkages have served (or attempted) to reinforce Russian hegemony in the region. The aim of this article is not to revisit this much-studied area in detail but it is important to note that, even in the 1990s when Russian influence in the region was in decline, significant bilateral links were maintained between Russia and most of the Central Asian states, in particular in the security and energy spheres. Also of importance as an indicator of the persistence of Russian hegemony in the region are the shared post-Soviet business and political cultures; as analysts have noted, 'these connections make Russian interests structurally part of *internal* arrangements in these countries'.[27]

As elsewhere in the post-Soviet space, Russia has attempted to utilise the security sphere to reinforce and demonstrate Russian dominance of the region. Throughout the 1990s, in terms of size, capability and deployment, the Russian armed forces were unchallenged as the dominant military power in Central Asia. Russian border troops were stationed across the region until the end of the 1990s; Russian peacekeeping troops were stationed in Tajikistan; and Russia signed leasing agreements for military facilities with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Then, as now, bilateral military cooperation with Central Asian states – which have been heavily dependent on Russia for equipment, repairs, and training since independence – was also an important mechanism of regional dominance for Russia.

As the same time, however, Russian hegemony was in sharp decline in the region. This decline was precipitated by a combination of factors including initial disengagement from the region after independence and the constraints imposed by greatly reduced economic and military capabilities. Renewed Russian interest in the region from the mid-1990s onwards failed to recover the ground lost in the initial post-Soviet period; a failure to consolidate relations in 1991 and 1992 appeared to have had lasting implications for the projection of Russian influence in Central Asia, although more recent events (discussed below) indicate that a reversal of Russia's hegemonic decline is occurring in the region, most obviously in the security sphere.[28]

Russia's status as a declining hegemon – a state which was dominant in the region but only because of a variable combination of acceptance and even greater weakness on the part of most of the other states – meant that its government was powerless to prevent the incursion into what it perceived as its sphere of influence by a more

[27] Steven J. Main, James Sherr, and Mark A. Smith, *The Pattern of Russian Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia*, Conflict Studies Research Centre Occasional Brief 101 (December 2003), p. 1.

[28] See, for example, Irina Zviagelskaia, *The Russian Policy Debate on Central Asia* (London: RIIA, 1995). Robin Bhatty and Rachel Bronson note, however, that the Russian position in Central Asia – and in particular the Russian position relative to 'external' actors – improved in the late 1990s, as the threat posed by the Taliban encouraged a closer security relationship with Russia, 'NATO's Mixed Signals in the Caucasus and Central Asia', *Survival*, 42:3 (Autumn 2000), pp. 129–45, 133.

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powerful state with growing interests in the region, even though preventing this was clearly identified as one of the primary Russian goals in the region.[29] Thus, the emergence of a US military presence, arguably more than any other aspect of 'external' engagement with the region, acted as both a symbol of declining Russian influence and the catalyst for the Russian government's attempts to reassert its dominance.

Global hegemon, regional challenger: the USA

Although US involvement in Central Asia was evident throughout the 1990s, both multilaterally (in the form of some limited NATO–Central Asian cooperation), bilaterally through aid programmes, and, in particular, in the energy sector, a distinct US security presence was established in the region only in the period following 11 September 2001. As part of the 'War on Terror(ism)', and specifically in the context of the intervention in Afghanistan, US military bases were established in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and security cooperation developed with Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. Despite serious setbacks in 2005, in particular the eviction of US troops from Uzbekistan, the USA appears determined to retain a military presence in the region for at least the medium term, and to do so, in part, with the aims of increasing security influence relative to Russia and of addressing the emergence of China as a regional and potential global hegemonic force. Russia has thus been forced to confront the fact that the global hegemon emerged as an increasingly clear regional challenger in 21st century Central Asia.

In addition to the establishment of military bases, the US also strengthened its influence in the region through the expansion of economic, political, and other security ties. Bilateral aid figures, in particular, demonstrate a dramatic escalation of the USA's engagement in the region since 2001, particularly for those states that had made military bases available to the US: between 2000 and 2002, US governmental funding for Uzbekistan more than tripled and more than doubled for Tajikistan.[30] Intensified engagement in the region after September 2001 is also clearly evident in the increased number of bilateral governmental contacts – indeed, visits to the region by US officials became so frequent after 2001 that Donald Rumsfeld publicly joked about it.[31]

That this military, political, and economic encroachment into a traditional Russian sphere of influence is more than a temporary response to the short term security needs generated by the 'War on Terror(ism)' is evident from the scope of the engagement and the length of time envisaged for it. Almost from the start, reports suggested that the US wished to extend their leases on bases in the region for up to 25 years, to expand the bases, and to establish a base in Kazakhstan, which has been

[29] A point noted by, for example, Zviagelskaia, *The Russian Policy Debate*, and Lena Jonson, 'Russia and Central Asia', in Allison and Jonson (eds), *Central Asian Security*, pp. 95–126.

[30] Aid to Uzbekistan increased by $234m in this period, by $113m to Tajikistan and by $49m to Kazakhstan according to US State Department figures: ⟨www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rpt/23630.htm⟩.

[31] Speaking in Chicago in August 2004, he remarked that given the frequency with which 'I seem to find myself in Afghanistan and Pakistan and Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan – maybe if you changed the name of Chicago to Chicagostan I could get here more often', ⟨http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2004/tr20040806-secdef1121.html⟩.

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the recipient of increased financial support for its armed forces.[32] Rumsfeld's 2004 discussion with Uzbekistan about possible 'operating sites', which the US armed forces could use periodically (in line with the US's shift towards a 'lily pad' model of basing) also indicated a long term military interest in the region.[33]

However, the prospects for long term basing in the region appear uncertain after the expulsion of US forces from Uzbekistan in 2005 and the Central Asian states' distinct shift away from alliance with the USA and towards closer cooperation within Russian and Chinese-dominated frameworks. The USA appears to have sought to counter the loss of the Uzbek facilities by ensuring a continued presence in Kyrgyzstan and with an increasing focus on Kazakhstan as a potential security and political partner.[34] Neither move has been entirely successful, with the Kyrgyz government demanding a significant increase in the rent paid for US basing rights (in contrast to the Kyrgyz government's assertion that the Russian use of the Kant airbase would be rent-free), while Kazakhstan appears committed to maintaining a foreign policy balance between the USA, Russia, and China.[35] Nevertheless, the US government clearly remains committed to long term security engagement in the region, and to view both the reassertion of Russian influence and the growth of Chinese influence as negative developments for US security and other interests.

Aspirant sub-regional hegemon: Uzbekistan

Unlike the hegemonic role historically played by Russia in Central Asia and the recent spread of US influence in the region, the hegemonic status of Uzbekistan is aspirational rather than realised.[36] Nevertheless, the role of Uzbekistan in the region is important because of its geo-strategic position, its relative military strength, and precisely because of perceptions of its aspirations to regional dominance. This has been both recognised and reinforced by its relationship with Western states, in particular the USA after 9/11, and by the priority given to improving security relations with Uzbekistan evident in more recent Russian activity.

Despite a poorly performing economy, Uzbekistan emerged in the 1990s as the most militarily and geopolitically significant of the Central Asian states. Two reasons for this were Uzbekistan's armed forces (the largest in Central Asia) and its comparatively favourably geopolitical position – it is the only one of the Central

[32] See, for example, Itar-Tass, January 21 2002, in FBIS-SOV-2002-0121. In February 2004, Donald Rumsfeld signed a bilateral agreement that included a $12 million assistance package for the Kazakh armed forces and plans for military exercises and base refurbishment. American Forces Information Service News, 25 February 2004, ⟨http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Feb2004⟩.

[33] ⟨http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2004/tr200440225-secdef0492.html⟩

[34] See, for example, Cory Welt, 'Hoping on Kazakhstan: U.S. Engagement in Central Asia', *CSIS Commentary*, 27 September 2006.

[35] Jean-Christoph Peuch, 'Kyrgyz-US base talks end inconclusively', RFE/RL, 2 June 2006.

[36] On Uzbekistan's potential for, and aspirations to, regional hegemony, see, for example, Anthony Hyman, 'Moving out of Moscow's Orbit: The outlook for Central Asia', *International Affairs*, 69:2 (1993), pp. 289–304; Gregory Gleason, *The Central Asian States: Discovering independence* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997), especially his section on 'Tides of Uzbek hegemony' in Chapter 5; Lena Jonson, 'Russia and Central Asia'; Dan Burghart, 'In the Tracks of Tamerlane: Central Asia's path to the twenty-first century', *European Security*, 11:3 (Autumn 2002), pp. 1–19; and Annette Bohr, 'Regionalism in Central Asia: New geopolitics, old order', *International Affairs*, 80:3 (2004), pp. 485–502.

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Asian states that does not share a border with Russia, China, or Iran; it does, however, share a border with each of the other states in post-Soviet Central Asia. In addition, Soviet-era revisions to the borders of the Central Asian states awarded Uzbekistan many of the region's historic cultural centres; Uzbekistan thus claims to be the cultural centre of Central Asia – a claim much resented by neighbouring states.[37] Thus, Uzbekistan attempted to position itself as, in the words of its president, Islam Karimov, 'the core of Central Asia', which 'occupy[s] the central geopolitical situation in Central Asia, [and] has every opportunity to play a central role in the processes of the maintenance of the balance of forces'.[38] Critically, this appeared to be an assessment shared by US policy makers and analysts; Eugene Rumer, for example, describes Uzbekistan as the 'pivotal state' in the region, while in 2004, a member of the US administration testified to the US Congress that 'Uzbekistan inevitably assumes a key role in our policy towards the region. It occupies a core position in Central Asia [. . .] and it boasts the largest and most effective military.'[39] As a result, the USA's approach to Uzbekistan in the period from 9/11 until Uzbekistan's expulsion of US troops in 2005 was to treat it as the emergent subregional hegemon, providing political and material support for Uzbekistan's aspirations.[40]

One consequence of this aspiration towards subregional hegemony was Uzbekistan's desire to maintain independence of action in relation to Russia – although to do so without entirely divorcing from regional structures, which would have isolated Uzbekistan rather than strengthened its relative power in the region. Although Uzbekistan remained a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and joined other regional organisations, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) led by China and Russia, it avoided participation in many of the numerous multilateral agreements involving Russia and, in 1999, it failed to renew its membership of the CIS Collective Security Treaty (now the CSTO). As Lena Jonson notes, Uzbekistan's geo-strategic position and its sub-regional hegemonic potential made it both an important potential ally and a challenge to Russian influence in the region.[41] Uzbekistan has been suspicious of Russian regional hegemony in the post-Soviet period; for example, Russia is clearly the subject of Karimov's 1997 complaint about 'certain political forces' that believe 'that it is their special historical mission to have superiority over other nations', and

[37] As Martha Brill Olcott notes, for example, the cities of Bukhara and Samarkand were not, historically, predominantly Uzbek, but were incorporated into the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. 'Nation Building in Central Asia' in Roman Szporluk (ed.), *National Identity and Ethnicity in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* (Armonk, NY and London: M. E. Sharpe, 1994), pp. 208–29, p. 212.

[38] Islam Karimov, *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century* (Richmond: Curzon, 1997), p. 138.

[39] Eugene Rumer, 'The U.S. Interests and Role in Central Asia after K2', *The Washington Quarterly*, 29:3 (Summer 2006), pp. 141–54, 152; B. Lynn Pascoe, 'Uzbekistan: the key to success in Central Asia?', testimony before the Subcommittee on Central Asia, House International Relations Committee, 15 June 2004, ⟨http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/33579pfhtm⟩.

[40] See, for example, B. Lynn Pascoe, 'Uzbekistan': 'Uzbekistan inevitably assumes a key role in our policy towards the region. It occupies a core position in Central Asia [. . .] It is the guardian of a centuries-long tradition of enlightened Islamic scholarship and culture, and it boasts the largest and most effective military [. . .].' This assessment by the US administration is also noted (with reservations) in *Central Asia in US Strategy*, pp. 63–4. The paper argues that a stable Uzbekistan ('with strong, functional rule of law structures') would be a partner for the USA in ensuring regional stability (p. iv).

[41] Jonson, *Vladimir Putin*, p. 46, pp. 54–6.

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about 'recurrences of the imperial way of thinking and behaviour' and 'great power chauvinism and aggressive nationalism'.[42]

Uzbekistan's concerns about Russian hegemony also led it to establish a strong bilateral relationship with the global hegemon. As noted above, after 9/11 Uzbekistan became the site of the largest US military presence in post-Soviet Central Asia; in financial year 2002 it was the recipient of by far the greatest amount of, and the greatest increase in, US aid to the region.[43] The 'War on Terror(ism)' and the attendant escalation of US engagement in the region provided Uzbekistan with the opportunity to strengthen its position within the region and in relation to Russia through alliance with the global hegemon. However, this alliance proved to be short-lived. In May 2005 Uzbekistan demanded the withdrawal of US troops from its territory by the end of the year; the withdrawal was completed in November 2005. As relations with the USA deteriorated in 2004 and 2005, Uzbek-Russian relations appeared to improve; joint military exercises were held in September 2005 and a bilateral agreement, signed in November, provided for the use of each state's military facilities by the other.[44] This followed significant moves towards greater bilateral security cooperation in June 2004, when Russia finally ratified a 2001 agreement which provided for joint use of Russian and Uzbek air forces and air defence, and signed an agreement on strategic partnership; as in the September 2005 agreement, this apparently provided for reciprocal use of military facilities. It also included agreement on joint training, the training of Uzbek officers in Russia, and the supply of military equipment by Russia to Uzbekistan.[45] This security rapprochement marked a significant shift in Uzbekistan's relations with both global and regional hegemons. Relations with Russia have continued to develop bilaterally and multilaterally, with discussions apparently taking place over a future Russian airbase in Uzbekistan.[46]

China: Emergent regional and global hegemon?

In the security politics of Central Asia, China is arguably more important for the expectations of other actors about its future regional and global roles than for its current activity. Although China's engagement in the energy sector (most notably in Kazakhstan) is significant, its security engagements in the region are currently substantially more limited than in the case of the other three states. Nevertheless, security concerns about its western regions and other factors have led to participation in multilateral structures, in particular through the creation of the SCO, where joint anti-terrorism measures have been a key focus. The security aspects of the SCO have developed substantially since its creation, with joint military exercises becoming a

[42] Karimov, *Uzbekistan*, pp. 29–30.

[43] ⟨www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2003/19606pf.htm⟩. On Uzbekistan's desire to strengthen ties with the USA in order to restrict Russia's position in the region, see for example Martha Brill Olcott, *Central Asia's Second Chance* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), pp. 176–80.

[44] RIA Novosti, 14 November 2005.

[45] Itar-Tass, 2 June 2004, in FBIS-SOV-2004-0602; Interfax, 16 June 2004.

[46] In March 2007, Mikhail Fradkov was reported to have denied that talks on an airbase had taken place, and 'certainly not with reference to any particular location' – a clear indication that such talks had taken place, at least in general terms. Roger McDermott, 'Russia Reclaiming Central Asia as Sphere of Influence', Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor, 13 March 2007.

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feature of member activity – for example the 'Peace Mission-2007' exercises in August 2007, in which China and Russia both participated.

Although China is clearly not, as yet, engaged in anything like hegemonic competition in Central Asia, there are indications that both Russia and, in particular, the USA regard it as a future competitor, both in the region and globally.[47] In the Central Asian security context, China is also important to both states because of the trans-national nature of security threats, in particular terrorism, in the region. Current US security concerns in respect of China appear linked, in part, to China's leading role in the SCO and that organisation's position on the US military presence in the region.[48] The fact that China and Russia are members of the same regional organisation and have staged joint military exercises indicates that security relations between the regional hegemon and a state which is often advanced as the future regional and global hegemon are currently more characterised by cooperation than conflict. As a number of analysts have noted, this cooperation needs to be viewed in the context of the desire to counter, or attempt to balance against, the US presence in the region.[49]

This is not surprising, since if the USA appears increasingly concerned about China's presence in Central Asia, China also seems concerned by the US presence, especially its security interests in the region. The post-9/11 presence of US forces, and the US's expressed desire to retain basing capability in China's neighbour Kyrgyzstan for a quarter of a century, reinforces concerns that the USA's twenty-first century security focus is not only – or primarily – on the prosecution of its 'War on Terror(ism)' but also on the containment of China as a prospective hegemonic competitor.[50] This appears to be a factor encouraging the development of both bilateral and multilateral relations with Russia, although the extent of Chinese concerns about US activity in the region is disputed.[51]

Kazakhstan

The development of political structures and power competition in Central Asia cannot be considered without also noting the position of Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan plays an interesting role in the security politics of Central Asia but its role is not a

[47] On signs of possible Sino-Russian security competition, see Stephen Blank, 'China, Kazakh Energy and Russia: An unlikely *mènage à trois*', *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 3:3 (November 2005), pp. 99–109, and Rosemary Foot, 'Chinese Strategies in a US-Hegemonic Global Order: Accommodating and hedging', *International Affairs*, 82:1 (2006), pp. 77–94.

[48] See, for example, comments by Donald Rumsfeld ('Rumsfeld Encourages Transparency, Cooperation for China's Future', *American Forces Press Service*, 19 October 2005).

[49] On the development of Russia-China relations in twenty-first century, and their connection to developments in US policy, see for example, David Kerr, 'The Sino-Russian Partnership and US Policy towards North Korea: From hegemony to concert in Northeast Asia' *International Studies Quarterly*, 49:3 (2005), pp. 411–37, and Peter Ferdinand, 'Sunset, Sunrise: China and Russia construct a new relationship', *International Affairs*, 83:5 (2007), pp. 841–67.

[50] See, for example, Peter Hayes Gries, 'China Eyes the Hegemon', *Orbis* (Summer 2005), pp. 401–12; Jeanne L. Wilson, *Strategic Partners: Russian-Chinese Relations in the Post-Soviet Era* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), p. 182; and Aaron L. Friedberg, 'The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is conflict inevitable?' *International Security*, 30:2 (Fall 2005), pp. 7–45.

[51] See Hayes Gries, 'China Eyes the Hegemon' and Foot, 'Chinese Strategies' for different views on this issue.

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hegemonic one. Although clearly the most economically powerful state in the region by the start of the twenty-first century, its economic and accompanying political importance has not been reflected either in a leading, sub-regional military position or in the aspiration to security dominance that hegemonic ambitions would seem to require. Uzbekistan thus remains the only Central Asian state that has utilised comparative military strength to stake a claim to sub-regional hegemony. Kazakhstan's failure to do this needs to be understood in the context of the geostrategic vulnerability of its location between Russia and China, and its consequent pursuit of a foreign policy balanced between these two states and the USA.[52] Vulnerability to Russian and Chinese pressures is also a consequence of these states' engagement in aspects of Kazakhstan's domestic affairs, in particular both states' substantial investments in the Kazakh energy sector. Finally, and unlike Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan did not inherit significant armed forces, and for most of its independent existence could not afford to bear the high costs of creating such forces. Despite this, however, it is worth noting that Uzbekistan appears to regard Kazakhstan as its rival for regional dominance and that the USA's disappointments with Uzbekistan have led it to try to develop relations with Kazakhstan, which it is now also rhetorically building up as the most regionally powerful state.[53]

In summary, then, four actual, potential, and aspirant hegemonic states in Central Asia exist at three levels and exhibit a range of relationships to one another. The declining regional hegemon, Russia – the legal successor state to what was widely identified in the hegemony literature of the 1970s and 1980s as the global hegemonic challenger – appears to be engaged in a contest for regional hegemony with the global hegemon, the USA, who is also the regional challenger. Both states have sought to bolster their position through the establishment of security ties to the self-identified emergent sub-regional hegemon, Uzbekistan. The multi-levelled hegemonic interactions in the region are further complicated by the presence of China as an emergent regional and global challenger and by China's apparent desire to counteract perceived containment on the part of the global hegemon by developing political and security relations with the regional hegemon through multilateral regional structures.

Hegemonic stability and Central Asia

The multi-levelled nature of hegemonic interaction and competition in Central Asia raises the question of whether what appears to be emergent hegemonic competition in the region can be explained by the body of theory concerned with hegemonic competition and decline. The answer to this question has significant implications for the observer's expectations about stability and conflict in the region.

[52] On Kazakhstan's relationship to these states, see Robert Legvold (ed.), *Thinking Strategically: The Major Powers, Kazakhstan and the Central Asian Nexus* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press for American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2003).

[53] The US government have designated Kazakhstan a 'strategic partner'. A joint statement released by the US and Kazakh presidents in late 2006 stressed Kazakhstan's 'leadership in regional integration efforts', one of many indications that, after the collapse of relations with Uzbekistan, the US government is attempting to position Kazakhstan in the sub-regional hegemonic role that it recognised Uzbekistan as occupying before mid-2005. (Joanna Lillis, 'Kazakhstani leaders call US visit a success', Eurasianet, 3 October 2006.)

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As noted above, one of the striking features of the USA's engagement in post-Soviet Central Asia is the way in which it sought to strengthen its position in the region by establishing a close alliance with the state that was seeking to become sub-regional hegemon, Uzbekistan. Since mid-2005, however, relations between the various actual and potential hegemonic states have changed dramatically, with Uzbekistan expelling US forces, conducting joint military exercises with Russia and China, and concluding a bilateral agreement with Russia that, in principle, would permit Russian troops to be based in Uzbekistan. In the period since the establishment of a US military presence in Central Asia, Russia and China have also moved closer together on security questions, through the SCO.

This is interesting because it suggests that, once a single-level approach to the concept of hegemony is abandoned in favour of a more complex, multi-level model, hegemonic states seek to strengthen their positions in relation to hegemons at other levels or other stages of development by forming alliances with third party actual or potential hegemons at other levels. In the US-Uzbek relationship, both states stood to benefit *as hegemons* from their cooperation while, more recently, Russia and Uzbekistan have signalled closer cooperation on security and other issues, seemingly in response to the US.[54] Russia and China have similarly appeared to find areas of commonality on security issues through the SCO and joint exercises, again, apparently in response to the US presence.[55]

Between late 2001 and mid-2005, the levels of US-Uzbek bilateral cooperation and US assistance far outstripped US security engagement with any of the other Central Asian states. Uzbekistan accounted for almost a third of the total US financial assistance to the Central Asian and Caucasus states in 2002.[56] The US strengthened its foothold in the region through alliance with Uzbekistan, both through the short term benefits of military basing and the longer term benefit of strengthening the state in the region it appeared to believe was best able to check Russian moves to reassert its dominance. Uzbekistan, likewise, benefited from an alliance which had the capability to prevent the reassertion of Russian regional hegemony, while the huge increases in military and other aid received from the USA improved its position relative to the other Central Asian states. Indeed, both the quantity and the character of US aid and support for Uzbekistan raised concerns among some American analysts that the USA was either deliberately or inadvertently promoting Uzbek hegemony within Central Asia, although others saw the impact of the global hegemon's presence as a restraining influence on Uzbekistan's hegemonic aspirations.[57] The relationship enabled the US to improve its position as a global hegemon

[54] Buzan and Wæver argue, in fact, that a reorientation of Uzbek policy in 2000 suggests that Uzbekistan had concluded that 'achieving a subregional position of hegemony was most likely by cooperating with Russia' (*Regions and Powers*, p. 426). Although the events of the following year suggest that this was, at most, a short term strategy, a similar conclusion could be drawn, as I argue here, from the radical shift in Uzbek policy towards the USA and Russia in 2005.

[55] This would seem to support Pedersen's observation that 'a regional big power confronted with what is regarded as a hostile extra-regional power, may rationally choose to share power with its neighbours as part of, or as the price for, a power-aggregation strategy'. (Pedersen, 'Cooperative Hegemony', p. 690.)

[56] Total US assistance for the Caucasus and Central Asian regions for 2002 was $958 million, ⟨www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2003/19606pf.htm⟩. US government assistance to Uzbekistan for the same period was $298 million, over 31 per cent of the total, ⟨www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rpt/23630.htm⟩.

[57] On the dangers of the US promotion of Uzbekistan's hegemonic aspirations, see Pauline Jones Luong and Erika Weinthal, 'New Friends, New Fears in Central Asia', *Foreign Affairs*, March/April

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challenging for regional hegemony, while Uzbekistan strengthened its position as aspirant sub-regional hegemon.

The governments of both states therefore appeared to view their security relationship as beneficial, creating a matrioshka model in which the security interests of the state with aspirations to sub-regional hegemony could be incorporated into the security framework established by the global hegemon, strengthening its position relative to other states in the region and to the declining regional hegemon, while the global hegemon was able to use this security relationship with the aspirant sub-regional hegemon to assert itself as the dominant state in the region – in other words, to utilise its relationship with the sub-regional hegemon to challenge for regional hegemony.

The rapid reversal of US-Uzbek relations that culminated in Uzbekistan's 2005 expulsion of US military forces has been widely attributed to concerns about the US's promotion of what it calls 'regime change' and of democratisation, evident in the post-Soviet space from its support for the 'colour revolutions', and in the US criticism of the events in Andijan in May 2005.[58] In his speech at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in July 2005, Karimov attacked attempts by un-named actors – but clearly the USA – to destabilise the socio-political situation in the region and to impose their own development model.[59] This position was reinforced by the SCO Heads of State declaration at the same summit, which also called for Western states using Central Asian bases to set a deadline for withdrawal. As noted above, subsequent events have reinforced the impression that the Central Asian states, supported by Russia and China, have become significantly less positive about US engagement in the region than they were in the first half of the decade. The unwillingness of the Central Asian states to allow Russia to use the SCO to balance against the USA, which Roy Allison noted in 2004, appears to have been overcome since 2005.[60]

The matrioshka model proved to be unsustainable, then, because the conflation of Uzbek and US interests did not extend beyond security into all areas of interaction; indeed, a central feature of US global, political hegemony – democracy promotion – proved to be fundamentally incompatible with the interests of the government of Uzbekistan. Since this exercise of US political hegemony is seen as a challenge to the domestic security of the governments of Russia and China as well as Uzbekistan, these three states (together with the other Central Asian states) have been able to develop security relations with one another, countering the perceived challenge posed by the USA. Thus, the exercise of US cultural-political hegemony at the global level appears, in Central Asia, to have caused serious difficulties for putative US security hegemony at the regional level.

2002 and Charles William Maynes, 'America Discovers Central Asia' *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2003. In contrast, Laurence A. Jarvik, for example, argues that 'the establishment of a US base in Uzbekistan restrained the Uzbek military from the temptations of regional adventurism and effectively reduced conflict with neighbouring countries'. 'Uzbekistan: A modernizing society', *Orbis* (Spring 2005), pp. 261–74, 261.

[58] See, for example, Pavel K. Baev, 'Turning Counter-terrorism into Counter-Revolution: Russia focuses on Kazakhstan and engages Turkmenistan', *European Security*, 15:1, pp. 3–22.

[59] Islam Karimov, 'Po puti bezopasnosti i stabil'nosty v regione' ('On the path to security and stability in the region'), 5 July 2005, ⟨http://www.press-service.uz/ru/gsection.scm?groupId=4392&contentId=10915⟩.

[60] Allison, 'Regionalism', p. 478.

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More significant for wider security concerns, however, is the question of Russian-US hegemonic competition in the region, and the interaction of that competition with the emergence of a prospective Chinese challenge to the USA. Given the predictions of the decline literature and that, at least for the first fifteen years after the collapse of the USSR, Russia was widely identified as an example of a declining (regional) hegemon, a first step is to revisit the predictions regarding the behaviour of declining hegemons faced with a challenger. Robert Gilpin identifies three methods by which a declining hegemon can seek to balance its increasing costs and resources: 'eliminate the reason for the increasing costs (that is, weaken or destroy the rising challenger)'; 'expand to a more secure and less costly defensive perimeter'; or it can engage in 'political, territorial, or economic retrenchment'. Retrenchment, in turn, can take a number of forms, including unilateral abandonment of commitments; forming alliances with other states; and appeasement of the challenger.[61]

In the case of Central Asia, the results to date have been ambiguous, although this is not altogether surprising given that the competition is recent in origin. Events since 2001 indicate that Russia has engaged, paradoxically, if pragmatically, in a strategy of simultaneous retrenchment and expansion. Initially, faced in late 2001 with the prospect of US deployment of troops irrespective of Russian preferences, Putin expressed strong support – following Gilpin's analysis, Russia engaged in strategy of appeasement, publicly supporting the use of US military facilities in the region in the context of the 'War on Terror(ism)', and thus facilitating the Central Asian states' involvement with 'Operation Enduring Freedom'. It is important to note here that while the Russian position was interpreted either as a sign of Russian weakness (since it was forced to endorse what it was unable to prevent – a US military presence in Central Asia) or of a shift away from Russian security competition with the USA, the fact that Putin chose to endorse the US presence can also be seen as a gesture invoking Russian dominance of the region, as a granting of permission.[62] The first and third of these interpretations together support the model of declining hegemon – one that seeks (even if only rhetorically) to assert its dominance over the region, while unable to prevent the assertion of another state's interests.

As the immediate impact of 11 September 2001 receded, however, and as Russia's economic position strengthened and its foreign and security policies developed, Russia sought to counter and contain the American military presence by reasserting its own political and military presence in the region, in particular by widening the scope of bilateral military agreements and expanding its network of bases in Central Asia. It has also sought to assert its presence in the region through demonstrations of multilateral security cooperation, including CIS and SCO joint exercises and the establishment of a new airbase at Kant in Kyrgyzstan in late 2003 – the first new Russian base to be established anywhere in the post-Soviet period – only 20 kilometres from the US base. As Roy Allison has noted, the discrepancy between the base's ostensible functions and its structure and capabilities suggest that the new base has a broader geopolitical function.[63]

[61] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change*, pp. 191–3.
[62] On the Russian response as evidence of a shift away from competition, see, for example, Antonenko, 'Putin's Gamble', p. 54.
[63] Allison, 'Strategic Reassertion', p. 287.

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This policy of reassertion has been evident in relation to all the Central Asian states. In addition to the improving security relationship with Uzbekistan, noted above, Russia signed a bilateral security agreement with the previously isolationist Turkmenistan in April 2003, and new security agreements with Kazakhstan in January 2004 extending the Russian lease of the Baikonur facility and committing the two states to increasing bilateral military interaction, including the joint use of troops.[64] In Tajikistan, too, an apparently stalled agreement was revived in June 2004, when Russia and Tajikistan reached agreement on the long-standing issue of a Russian military base. The Tajik Deputy Defence Minister asserted at the time that 'we stand for stronger cooperation with the Russian Armed Forces', a view reflected by the Tajik Defence Minister in 2006 when he asserted that Russia was Tajikistan's main security partner and that 'the Tajik armed forces have been set up thanks to Russia's assistance and contribution'.[65] According to press reports, and unlike basing agreements negotiated by Russia with other CIS states, the leasing of the Tajik base is for an unlimited period.[66]

Finally, Russia appears to have sought to counter the US's challenge in Central Asia by developing regional ties with the prospective regional and global hegemon, China, in the context of strengthened multilateral structures within the region, as noted above. The success of this strategy (and at least in the short term it does appear to have been successful) has rested in part on the ability of these states to find common ground in opposition to the extension of regional democracy promotion, a key feature of US global hegemony. Thus the development of a limited, regional alliance with China has helped, in the short term, to turn back the challenge posed by the USA; however, longer term questions about competing Russian and Chinese interests in the region remain.

Conclusion

Earlier in this article, I outlined the concept of matrioshka hegemony, in which hegemons at different levels coexist without significant competition, and even have the potential to cooperate ways that mutually reinforces their hegemony. Despite perceptions on the part of some analysts that a 'new Great Game' was emerging, this model can be applied to security relations in Central Asia during the 1990s, a period characterised by US global hegemony and when Russian dominance on security issues was not under significant challenge from any 'external' power. In the period since 11 September 2001, this model no longer applies. The 1990s saw the coexistence – peaceful if not necessarily always friendly – of a number of states exercising hegemony at different levels in relation to Central Asia. In the period of the 'War on Terror(ism)', however, the global hegemon mounted a sustained challenge to Russian regional hegemony. If, as here, one hegemon seeks to change its role – by assuming a hegemonic role at a different level – the matrioshka model ceases to work because two hegemons cannot coexist at the same level. The clear risk is that in this

[64] Ibid., p. 289.
[65] Itar-Tass, 4 June 2004; Roger McDermott, 'Tajik Military Weary of NATO', Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor, 4 April 2006.
[66] Interfax, 4 June 2004.

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situation competition for hegemony at a single level begins to occur, and that, following the theoretical literature, hegemonic competition leading to war becomes possible. A complicating factor is that in an environment where multiple actual and aspirant hegemons exist at a number of levels, cooperation between one or more such states may emerge in response to competition between these states and other hegemonic states – in other words, hegemonic conflict and hegemonic competition may exist on the same issues and in the same area at the same time.

This situation is complicated still further by the fact that hegemons may assert their dominance unevenly across different issue areas and, perhaps more importantly, may attach differing values to the preservation of hegemony on different issues. In the case of post-Soviet Russia, particular concern has been given to preserving Russian regional hegemony in the post-Soviet space in the security sphere. This made the US military incursion into Central Asia particularly problematic, and poses a risk of destabilising conflict that was not present before, despite concerns about the consequences of energy competition reflected in the 'Great Game' model.

The contradictory nature of the Russian response to US engagement in the former Soviet Union is the product of the extreme disparity in military, economic and political power between Russia and the US – in other words, of the fact that the regional challenger is also the global hegemon. Anatol Lieven noted in 2002 that while Putin's foreign policy was based on a recognition that Russia had lost the USSR's superpower status, it was committed to retaining its 'role as a *great* power on the territory of the former Soviet Union'.[67] In other words, it was founded on a renunciation of aspirations to global hegemony but a commitment to the maintenance and strengthening of regional hegemony. In the period immediately after 9/11, this required Russia to tolerate the US presence in the region. In the longer term, however, and in the context of both a strengthened Russian economy and more assertive Russian foreign and security policies in respect of the USA and US-dominated organisations, it has raised the possibility of an escalation in the nascent security competition between the two states, one in which both the aspirant subregional hegemon and a potential global/regional hegemon have been involved as allies of Russia and/or the USA. In the period up to 2005, both Russia and the USA required support from these other two potential hegemons – Russia because of its economic and military weakness relative to the global hegemon/regional challenger, and the USA because of its need for a strong partner within the region to counter the dominance of the regional hegemon. Russia's strengthening economic position, the attendent increase in foreign and security policy assertiveness, and the conflict of the democracy promotion aspect of US political hegemony with the Central Asian governments' political interests have worked to counteract the US challenge to Russia in the region, at least in the short term. How the USA will respond to this seeming failure, particularly in the wider context of the sharp and generalised deterioration in Russian-US relations, is a question that has significant implications for the security and stability of the Central Asian states. A further, longer-term issue, with implications for international security, concerns the long term prospects for extending the current security cooperation between Russia and China in Central Asia.

[67] Lieven, 'The Secret Policemen's Ball', p. 254.

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The response to regional challenge by the global hegemon is less likely to result in war than single level hegemonic competition for at least two closely related reasons: firstly, because the position of the stronger, global-level hegemon is not being challenged, and because the weaker of the two states, the regional hegemon, is inevitably reluctant to engage in a conflict with the global hegemon. This does not imply, however, that conflict will be avoided altogether. Recent accounts of states' behaviour in the face of US global hegemony have often identified soft-balancing or leash-slipping as responses. However, the Russian response has already clearly exceeded the limits of soft balancing; the strengthening of the security component of the SCTO, including the holding of regular military exercises; the opening of new military bases in the region, including one close to a US base; the hostility towards a continued US presence in the region, evident in Russian statements and SCTO communiqués; the willingness to exploit the 2005 US-Uzbek rift; and, of course, Russia's assertiveness in its extra-regional foreign and security policy in respect of the USA are all evidence of this. It is also evident that the case does not fit the leash-slipping model. This is because, although there is no indication that the Russian administration regards the USA as posing an immediate existential threat, it is clear that they do not regard American military encroachment into the post-Soviet space as a 'soft' threat, especially when it is considered together with US missile defence policy, US support for the overthrow of authoritarian regimes in the FSU, and the increased willingness of the US administration to speak about the inadequacies of Russian democracy.

The Russian response to the US presence in Central Asia thus does not fit the soft balancing or leash slipping models. This is not surprising since these models have been developed to explore responses to the presence and actions of a global hegemon by non-hegemonic states, not what happens when the global hegemon's interests in a region conflict with hegemons at other levels in that region. Clearly, a challenge to the interests of the regional hegemon is likely to provoke a stronger response than these models can account for. The sharp deterioration in Russian-US relations during the first decade of the twenty-first century needs to be understood in this context – as a response by Russia to a sustained challenge by the global hegemon to its regional hegemony in Central Asia and elsewhere in the CIS. While war between these states does not appear to be a likely outcome of this conflict of interests, the Russian response – including governmental rhetoric, foreign policy in respect of the USA and the CIS states, and the parameters and scale of Russian military modernisation – appears to have been considerably more forceful than many US and Western European policymakers and analysts anticipated. This is, in part, a consequence of the failure to recognise that a multi-levelled hegemonic encounter was occurring, with the consequent high stakes for the hegemon being challenged, as the hegemony literature identifies.

The model of multi-levelled hegemony, which I have developed here, highlights the simultaneous presence of competition and conflict, while also giving both greater weight to subregional factors than the hegemony literature and greater weight to the importance of interaction between hegemons at different levels than the regional security and regional hegemony literatures has traditionally done. Indeed, although the International Relations literature in these areas recognises the condition of regional hegemony, there has been no recognition of the possibility or, as a result, the security consequences of interaction between co-existing hegemons at different levels.

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In a world characterised by the existence of different level hegemons and where the position of the global hegemon remains unchallenged, the importance of hegemonic interaction at other levels greatly increases.

I have argued that hegemonic war is highly unlikely in the Central Asian case because the global hegemon is acting as regional challenger and the regional hegemon is unwilling and/or unable to mount a challenge to the global hegemonic position of its regional challenger. Russian resurgence in the region, assisted by its relationship with both Uzbekistan and China, and facilitated, ironically, by the exercise of one aspect of political hegemony by the USA (democracy promotion and 'freedom through reform') indicates that competition is, nevertheless, a central feature of relations within the region. The various bilateral hegemonic relations in Central Asia in the post-Soviet period also indicate that actual and aspirant hegemonic states at different levels can cooperate in order to challenge or respond to challenge by hegemonic states at other levels. This suggests that the literature on hegemonic decline and war is limited in its capacity to explain hegemonic competition at levels other than the global, because regional and sub-regional hegemonic competition is critically affected by the presence of other levels. It also suggests that analyses of regional security need to account for the impact of hegemony, not just in material terms, but also in the ways that states utilise perceptions around hegemony to advance their interests. Thus, the Central Asian case suggests strongly that the literatures on hegemony and regional security need to be considered together, and that in a world where unchallenged global hegemony coexists with regional variants, recognition of the interplay between them is critical to the understanding of contemporary security challenges.

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