

Central Asia  
Dawn  
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# Great Game heating up in Cen

By Anwar Iqbal

WASHINGTON: Two recent studies by US think-tanks predict the revival of the big powers rivalry in the Central Asian region with a direct bearing on Pakistan which sits on the confluence of Central and South Asia and the Middle East.

The first study, released on Wednesday by the Chicago-based Power and Interest News Report, foresees Russia and China getting together to combat growing US influence in Central Asia.

The other report, by Washington-based Stimson Center, examines US efforts to enlist India's support to counter Sino-Russian influence in Central Asia and warns that India and China also have common interests that may produce friction in the US-Indian relationship.

Russia and China, bilaterally and along with the members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,

are posing a serious challenge to US interests in the Central Asian region, says Adam Wolfe who authored the PINR report, 'The Great Game Heats Up in Central Asia'.

"While this combination (is) not enough to knock the US out of the region, it (is) the most forceful challenge to US interests in Central Asia since the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001," he says.

Seeking to prevent any further damage to Washington's position in the 'Great Game', last week US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld travelled to the region to shore up support for maintaining its bilateral agreements with the key players. This was followed by Uzbekistan announcing a deadline for US withdrawal from a military base in its territory.

"These moves indicate that even though fighting in Afghanistan has yet to cool down, the traditional power pol-

itics of Central Asia are heating up," says Mr Wolfe.

Stimson Center's Ziad Haider, in his report titled 'US-India-China: Giants at Play', notes that with an annual trade of \$15 billion, China is India's third largest trading partner after the EU and the US. India and China are also united in their quest for energy to fuel their growth. A Sino-Indian convergence also exists in the WTO where both are championing the developing world's cause of greater market access to the developed world including the US.

India may also break ranks with the US on China due to domestic politics. In the Congress-led coalition government, the Left parties are a key ally and are increasingly asserting their views in foreign policy. The Left is also more amenable to closer ties with China.

"A final trigger for Sino-Indian con-

vergence is the US's sole superpower status and its propensity for unilateralism. India, like China, has watched this trend with great concern and continues to withhold any meaningful support to US efforts in Iraq," says Mr Haider.

He points out that in their first stand-alone trilateral meeting last month, the foreign ministers of India, China and Russia called for a 'democratisation of international relations, a consistent application of the principles of multilaterality in problem settlement, and the strengthening of the role of the United Nations'.

"In short, as India leverages US strength for its own ends, India's Nehruvian strain of non-alignment and multilateralism may not always be able to digest the US's preponderance of power. Here, too, India may be compelled to close ranks with China and others," argues Mr Haider.

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meeting Chinese President Hu Jintao and Russian President Vladimir Putin issued an important joint statement on 'the international order of the 21st century', which addresses 'US hegemony' in several less-than-oblique passages. The text emphasizes non-interference in internal affairs, mutual respect for other nations' sovereignty, and stresses the role of 'multipolarity' in dealing with conflicts.

In a passage aimed at Washington's perceived encroachment in Central Asia, the document states, "The international community should thoroughly renounce the mentality of confrontation and alignment, should not pursue the right to monopolize or dominate world affairs, and should not divide countries into a leading camp and a subordinate camp."

Referring to the July 5 meeting of the SCO in Astana, Kazakhstan, Mr Wolfe says that while the group's pre-

vious meetings focused on terrorism, separatism and extremism, this meeting demonstrated that the organization, which represents nearly 50 per cent of the world's population, desires to be a serious force in international affairs.

"This can be seen in the granting of observer status to India (at Russia's request), Pakistan (at China's insistence) and Iran (to the delight of all members)," he notes.

The SCO sought to limit Washington's presence in the region — Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan shifted their support to China and Russia in order to protect their sovereignty from 'US meddling'. The joint declaration issued at the end of the summit took aim at Washington by rejecting attempts at 'monopolizing or dominating international affairs' and insisting on 'non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states'.