

## **INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGES AND OPTIONS AMIDST NEW GREAT GAME IN CENTRAL ASIA**

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### **Abstract**

The Great Game which divided Persia into a Russian-controlled northern zone, a nominally independent central zone, and a British-controlled southern zone, officially ended with the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907. After the end of Cold War, Central Asia became the central point of attention for the world powers, US, Russia and China, EU etc. and many other regional players. Possessing divergent interests, the competition among external powers in the region is popularly termed as the New Great Game. Central Asian governments are working to use renewed external involvement for their sovereign advantages and, thereby, extract economic and political benefits wherever possible. India considers the region as geo-strategically vital to fulfill its various interests like energy, trade, and investment, security etc. and both the regions own multifaceted historical ties. Apart from economic and other commercial interests, India also considers the region vital for the security and stability of Afghanistan. At present, the Middle East accomplishes the required energy imports of India but in recent times, the region turned more unstable. Hence Indian policymakers started thinking about an alternative source and identified Central Asia as the best option. Therefore, economic diplomacy remains India's basic policy thrust towards the region and needs no clash but a compatibility of interests with the new states.

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India has to face many challenges to get connected with Central Asia like the New Great Game, lack of proper road link, religious extremism and terrorism, drug trafficking, small arms proliferation, and others. India has to take lead to overcome the significant influence made by several regional powers and to make its own position extremely strong in the region. Hence this study has made an assessment about diverse interests that India possesses and various challenges due to the role of external major powers in the region and also India's strategy to protect its interests in energy-rich Central Asia.

### **Introduction**

During the nineteenth century, Britain and Russia vied with each other to enhance their influence in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Persia (now Iran). This competition was termed as the 'Great Game'. The term "Great Game" was given by the British intelligence officer Arthur Conolly, but was popularized by the British novelist Rudyard Kipling in his novel 'Kim'. The Great Game was an intense rivalry between the British and Russian Empires in Central Asia, beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing through 1907. Britain sought to influence or control much of Central Asia, to buffer the "Crown Jewel" of its empire - British India. Tsarist Russia, meanwhile, sought to expand its territory and sphere of influence, in order to create one of history's largest land-based empires. The Russians would have been quite happy to wrest control of India away from Britain.

As Britain solidified its hold on India (including what is now Myanmar, Pakistan and Bangladesh), Russia conquered Central Asian khanates and tribes on its southern borders. The front line between the two empires ended up running through Afghanistan, Tibet, and Persia. Britain's attempts to conquer Afghanistan ended in humiliation, but the independent nation held as a buffer between Tsarist Russia and British India. In Tibet, Britain established control for just two years after the Younghusband Expedition<sup>i</sup> of 1903-04, before being displaced by Qin Shi Huang, the then ruler of China. The Chinese emperor fell just seven years later, allowing Tibet to rule itself yet again.

The Great Game officially ended with the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 which divided Persia into a Russian-controlled northern zone, a nominally independent central zone, and a

British-controlled southern zone (Hopkirk, 1994). The Convention also specified a borderline between the two empires running from the eastern point of Persia to Afghanistan and declared Afghanistan an official protectorate of Britain. Relations between the two European powers continued to be strained until they allied against the Central Powers during World War I.

### **The emergence of Central Asia**

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 gave birth to many independent states including five Central Asian countries. Central Asia is a region that occupies an important place in the Asian continent. The region stretches from the Caspian Sea in the West to China in the East, from Afghanistan in the South to Russia in the North. The names of all the five Central Asian Republics ending with the Persian suffix “stan” means, “land” and in the modern period the five republics, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan cover the definition of Central Asia. Central Asia also became the homeland of many Turkic people and hence it is sometimes identified as Turkestan. Central Asia has been divided into four zones by the geographers: steppe zone, semi-desert zone, desert zone, and the southern mountains. The total land area of Central Asia is 4003400sq.km and the total population of approximately 30 million as per latest World Bank statistics. Among five Central Asian Republics (CARs), Kazakhstan is the largest country covering 2717300sq km. area and Tajikistan are the smallest with an area of 143100sq.km. Uzbekistan is the most populous (29776850) among Central Asian Republics (CARs) and Turkmenistan, least populous with a population of 5172931. Islam is the main religion of Central Asia and Russian, Kazakh, Tajik, Uzbek, Krygz, Turkmen are the major languages spoken in the region. Ashgabat, Tashkent, Astana, Dushanbe, Bishkek are the capital towns of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan respectively (Shafi, 2007). Further, some other towns which are famous around the world are Samarkand, Bukhara, and Fergana. Central Asian states can be said to be the gift of two rivers Syr Darya and Amu Darya which fall into the Aral Sea. Central Asian states share their borders with Russia, China, Afghanistan, Iran, and Azerbaijan.

Central Asia is strategically located in the heart of the Eurasian region. Central Asia is in the middle of three super civilizations—the Islamic, the Christian, and the Buddhist and is seen by many experts as one of the most vulnerable areas of instability between them. The region may

become a natural, historically formed buffer zone as well as hub of Islamic extremism. Being placed in the middle of the Eurasian Continent, it is also one of the most convenient routes of transit. The Central Asian Republics are situated on the eastern side of the Caspian Sea and is endowed with plenty of oil and natural gas reserves. These energy resources are going to be a possible source of diversification particularly for those countries which are heavily dependent on energy imports from West Asia and other energy-rich destinations (Foshko, 2012). Therefore, its geo-strategic location and vast energy resources lead to increasing interest by the various major powers as well as some regional powers in the Central Asian Republics and many experts point out that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Central Asia will occupy an important position from both international and regional perspective.

### **Interests of Major Powers in Central Asia: the US, Russia, and China**

Central Asia is highly rich in hydrocarbons and being strategically located, the world has started taking more notice of Central Asia during the last few decades. For the United States and its allies, the region is a valuable supply hub of logistic and strategic for the Afghanistan war efforts. Washington has three main policy goals in the region: first, to ensure the sovereignty and independence of the countries of the region; second, to exploit their oil and gas reserves, and third to concentrate on neutralizing Russian influence in the region. Besides these interests, the US policy towards Central Asia also contains many long-standing objectives. Iran has become the chief opponent of the United States and after the Gulf War Iran has emerged as a significant regional player which for obvious reasons America did not want. To offset Iranian influence in the region, USA, Turkey, Israel, and Europe have come under a common umbrella to prevent Islamization of Central Asia (Roman, 2012). Economist Shafiqul Islam is of the view that oil and natural gas in Central Asia have attracted the attention of Americans, Japanese, and other foreign investors. The political targets of the USA in Central Asia include stability, democratization and free market economy to enhance commercial activities, control nuclear weapons and to settle human rights standards. The Islamic fundamentalism which is being exported by neighboring countries like Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, figures top priority in US policy towards the region.

After the dissolution of the USSR, Russia identified Central Asia as an area of crucial importance to retrieve its position and influence in the region. However, Russia's geopolitical strategy is not intended to produce an imperial resurgence or re-Sovietization of this part of the world. Among the external players in the region, Russia identifies China that can only be problematic to Russia in the longer term in Central Asia. Moscow hopes that regional players like Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan are not able to displace Russian superiority in the region. The Central Asian countries feel comfortable with Russia than others because the leaders of Central Asian republics know very well about how to deal with their Russian counterparts. Russia hopes to fortify the Central Asian regimes against democracy promotion from the outside and to resist any American military or political presence in the area. Russia's involvement in the region is also compelled by its concerns about the possible Islamist threat in the North Caucasus and the Volga region<sup>ii</sup> as well as the extremely porous border with Kazakhstan (Markedonov, 2013). Russia's economic presence in Central Asia is much lower as compared to those achieved during the Soviet period because more players like China and EU have made their entry in the region. Therefore Russia moves more towards Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to maintain a strong grip over the region. Russia has initiated a number of economic institutions in order to pursue its various economic interests in the region like the Customs Union (CU); the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC); Eurasian Development Bank (EDB); Anti-Crisis Fund; CIS Free Trade Zone (FTZ). Besides economic motive, the other vital aspect of Russia's engagement in Central Asia is that of large-scale labor migration from Central Asian republics to Russia. Russia has also made a significant military presence in the region, predominantly to thwart any security challenges like drug trafficking, transnational crime, illegal migration, small arms proliferation, terrorism etc to its territory from the region<sup>iii</sup>. In fact, Russia is more close to Central Asian republics than other players as all of them were part of former USSR and in turn, Central Asian countries are also closely linked with Russia for the military, technical, and economic assistance.

China: the other major external power in Central Asia is a close neighbor of the region sharing a similar culture and a long history of communication possess geostrategic and geo-economic interests. Since their independence, Central Asian states have been a victim of terrorism, national separatism, religious extremism, smuggling, drug trafficking, arms dealing, that pose a serious

threat not only to Central Asian countries but also to neighboring countries including China. China is also active in Central Asian region because of close ethnic links between China's Xinjiang province and Central Asian people. Due to the presence of external powers in the region, China fears about the instability in both Xinjiang and CARs. Central Asian countries are economically less developed as compared to other former Soviet states and hence China has made huge investments in various commercial sectors. To counter the possible threats of terrorism from Afghanistan after the fall of Taliban Regime, China along with Russia and four Central Asian states except for Uzbekistan, formed SCO that provided China an opportunity to make engagement in Central Asian security affairs as well (Huasheng, 2012). SCO is also the best mechanism for cooperation between Russia and China and through such organization, China has begun to display its strong position and potential in Central Asia. At present there is no border dispute between China and Central Asian states and China has maintained regular political relation with all CARs. However, China is more concerned about the growing US-Central Asia relations and the presence of US military in the region that will have severe consequences upon the security of neighboring countries like that of China.

The main purpose behind Chinese involvement in Central Asia is economic. Both China and CARs are now focusing on enhancement of trade and commercial relations and the bilateral trade volume has increased rapidly over the last decade. China prefers direct and close engagements with the region to fulfill its energy requirements and to minimize her dependence on Russian and Iranian imports (Yong, 2012). China has made a significant position in the global market regarding their finished products and because of comparatively low purchasing power of CARs, China identifies Central Asia as one big market for their products. CARs have the potential to accomplish the growing energy demand of China. China has also become successful in constructing various energy pipelines that will transport Caspian gas from Central Asia to China. On the other hand, several regional players like Iran is making the best use of its traditional and geographical proximity to come closer to the region and get benefitted economically and culturally. Turkey offers the safest and cheapest route for transporting Caspian gas from Central Asia to European markets and thus to earn transit fees. Both India and Pakistan are also engaged to have cooperation with CARs in the fields of trade, commerce, industries, education etc. Germany, Norway, Japan, France, and some other countries are co-partners of Central Asian

Energy resources through private and business firms. Hence the Soviet Collapse opened a path to various big and regional players for competition to obtain maximum economic benefit from the Central Asian region (Kaw, 2010). Some commentators have referred to Washington, Moscow, and Beijing's renewed activity in the region as a The New Great Game. The fundamental objective of energy diplomacy of all the big and regional powers in Central Asia is to get the lead and to reduce the influence of others.

Unlike the British and Russian empires in their era of competition and conquest, the running phase of struggle in Central Asia is entirely different. The Central Asian governments are also making use of external involvement to their own advantages through bidding and to harvest utmost profit. Most dramatically, in 2009, President Kurmanbek Bakiyev of Kyrgyzstan, host to the Manas Transit Centre<sup>iv</sup>, initiated a bidding war between the United States and Russia by threatening to close the base. He extracted hundreds of millions of dollars from both sides, in the form of a Russian assistance package and a renewed lease at a higher rent with the United States. Since 2008, the United States has also paid transit fees, about \$500 million annually, to the Uzbek and other Central Asian governments to ship equipment bound for Afghanistan through the Northern Distribution Network (Cooley, 2012). The Central Asian case today is not a throwback to the past but a guide to what is to come: the rise of new players and the decline of Western influence in a multi-polar world. In fact, the 'New Great Game' is in favor of Central Asian Republics who obtain maximum advantage through energy politics and rivalry among external powers.

### **India and Central Asia Bilateral Relations**

The importance of Central Asia to India is not merely civilizational and historical, but also geostrategic and economic. The subject of Indo-Central Asian relations is not a new one, but the bilateral cultural and historical relationship dates back to the very dawn of history as there has been a constant flow of culture and commerce between the two regions. A large number of immigrants consisting of scientists, scholars, technicians, and artisans came to India from Central Asia contributed to the rich tapestry of Indian culture and life. However, from the Indian side, Indian missionaries and merchants transmitted religion, art, and merchandise to the Central Asian

region. In other words, the relationship between India and Central Asia evolved not in isolation but evolved through reciprocal cultural enrichment.

India enjoyed cordial relations with former USSR and therefore the country was more close to Central Asian republics than any other regional nation-states. In modern times India as an extended neighbor of CARs has major geostrategic and economic interests including energy, trade and investment, and the beginning of a military relationship. India established diplomatic economic and cultural relations with all the five Central Asian states immediately after the end of Cold War. India's Ministry of Defense in its Annual Report 2009-10 considered Central Asian region as an area of vital importance to India, not only because of its geographical proximity and historical and cultural links with the region, but also because of the common challenges that both face from religious extremism, drug trafficking, arms proliferation, terrorism etc (Mehmood, 2011). The Central Asian region is considered by India as an area of utmost significance so far as the security situation in Afghanistan is concerned. However the main motive behind India's engagement with Central Asia is economic and in order to strengthen its economic relation, a roundtable was held in New Delhi in 2005. Four energy Consuming Asian countries like India, China, Japan and Republic of Korea identified the core areas including Central Asia to attain energy (Ahmad, 2010). The future prospects for cooperation between Central Asia and India in the field of energy security seem to be very important. Over the past few years, India has stepped up its relationship with Central Asian republics and has recently gained the full membership of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Indian manufacturing and investment companies are very apprehensive about entering into the unfamiliar markets of Central Asia. Most of the Indian business communities are enthusiastic to find out the possibilities that lie in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan by virtue of increased interaction with those countries. There is also scope for cooperation in the field of civil nuclear power between India and Central Asia. Recently there is a 10-fold increase in power capacities of the nuclear power stations in India and by considering a 5-fold increase in output of uranium in Kazakhstan, the field of cooperation becomes vast. The banking sector is another promising area where India eyes more in Central Asia and in this regard the Punjab National Bank's acquisition of controlling state in Kazakh Danabank will not only facilitate Indian businesses transactions on



the market of Kazakhstan but in other Central Asian countries as well. There is realistic bilateral cooperation between India and CARs in the field of IT (Khairi, 2012). Many Indian multinational companies are enthusiastic to enter in the region like Tata is interested in setting up a power plant in Kazakhstan, while BHEL is looking at restoring some Kazakh thermal power plant stations. There is more possibility of Cooperation in Hydroelectric power cooperation between India and Tajikistan.

Central Asia is a huge consumer market, hungry for a range of goods and services, which India can provide. Both India and Central Asia have economic complementarities in terms of resources, manpower, and markets. These diverse resources can be pooled for a broader regional cooperation in Asia and to realize the potential of both the regions fully. Certain Indian commodities, for example, tea and drugs, pharmaceuticals and fine chemicals have established a foothold in the Central Asian markets. In fact, it was only after 2001 India put more interest to Central Asia and the region became an area of high priority to India and the core areas identified by India in the region include key issues, advantages, and various challenges.

### **Impact of New Great Game on India's Interests**

The involvement of the external powers in Central Asia has left indelible imprints on Indian interests in various fields. Comparatively, India is in a weaker position and it has to face major powers over bidding there. India lags significantly behind all the major players in the region (Russia, China, Iran, US, and Turkey) in trading volumes with the Central Asian countries and has failed to exploit the vibrant consumer market. In this regard, India lacks an active and committed movement towards New Silk Road vision of intercontinental connectivity.

The major powers in Central Asia are making huge investments in various sectors and on account of this, the region has become a chessboard for such major powers and this energy struggle among major powers in the region poses immense strategic challenges before India. Through SCO, China has been trying to replicate its Pakistan and Myanmar policies with regard to Central Asia. Both China and Pakistan design to encircle India with a pan Islamic arc by promoting fundamentalist groups and China's Xinjiang has the potential to become an area where Islamic forces will try to pin India down. Pakistan-China cooperation in the region can

affect India's interests in Central Asia to a larger extent (Dwivedi, 2006). After 9/11 episode, the US has increased its military presence in the region and on account of this, India suffered heavily due to spill over of extremist and terrorist activities towards Indian territory. Apart from having a better traditional relationship with Russia, the later is also opposing Indian presence in its vicinity particularly the security aspects like Indian military presence.

Among other major challenges that India faces while connecting with the region includes lack of proper road link. India is not having a proper road, rail or air connection with the energy-rich Central Asia. India lacks faster, more hassle-free and a less expensive way to transport goods through Iran to the Central Asian countries and further north to Russia (Sikri, 2009). Drug trafficking, particularly from Afghanistan, is another major challenge that both India and Central Asia face today. The huge amount of money obtained through illegal drug trafficking is chiefly used by various terrorist agencies against India (Sarma, 2012). The religious extremism and terrorism continue to threaten and challenge the territorial integrity of India and can destabilize the whole Central Asian region. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Hizb-ul-Tahrir, Lashkar-e-Taiba and many other terrorist groups are hindrances in the way of successful cooperation between India and Central Asia. Another major challenge to India comes from the possible US-led NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan. The proximity of Central Asia to the Afghan border has raised the possibility of a spillover of extremist activity in the region. If the Taliban becomes successful to get control of Kabul once again it will encourage not only Pakistan but also extremists in Xinjiang in China, Indian Occupied Kashmir and all over South Asia.

Therefore, there are many possibilities of mutual cooperation between Central Asia and India, but the need of the hour is to overcome some hurdles and to initiate such programs and policies that will help India to counter these possible challenges. In short, the real and profitable engagement between India and Central Asia possess enormous scope for the peace and stability in the entire region.

## **Conclusion**

India's economic policy of 1992 envisaged liberalization, privatization, and globalization of Indian economy. The main policy objectives of the new economic policy could be achieved only

through the consumption of coal, petroleum and natural gas. Hence the rising demand of energy became wide and to cope with the problem of supply and demand, India has reframed its various policies and identified Central Asia to fulfill its future energy demands. Under such circumstances, the Central Asian republics offer India new opportunities mainly in the economic sphere to diversify its oil imports. Central Asia and Caucasus region are considered to be the next oil and gas frontier and thus became the focus of major power's attention mostly after the end of cold war.

Despite India's late entry into the region, it has formulated many constructive policies towards the region in order to speed up its engagement with the region. Realizing the importance of Central Asia, India's Minister of State for External Affairs Shri E. Ahmedon 12 June 2012 announced Connect Central Asia Policy that includes broad-based political, security, economic and cultural connection with the region. India is well aware of the necessity of stable Afghanistan not only because of its own security but for the security of the whole region including Central Asia. India is devoted to establishing a military presence in the region to thwart any future security threat. As a result, India, in order to guard against the growing instability in the region, opened an air base in Ayni, Tajikistan in 2002. India's ties with regional states are growing and moderate Islam of the region makes it imperative for India to engage the region more substantively. No doubt India is mainly interested in economic cooperation but there are many other important areas like pharmaceuticals, textiles, IT, tourism, infrastructure building and food processing etc. in which bilateral cooperation can take place. India can regain its traditional status in the region through the alternative routes that can bypass both Pakistan and Afghanistan, the two politically unstable nations.

India's interests in Central Asia are considerable and in coming years it will seek to maximize its power and influence in the region to a possible extent. Though India desires to play an active role in Central Asia at the same time terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, energy security, drug trafficking, lack of proper transport link, US-led NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan to constitute major concerns that India faces. Moreover, the great power competition and the influence of regional players in Central Asia will also make it harder for India to pursue its interests.

In fact, Central Asia is very significant to India not only because of civilizational and historical ties but also because of geopolitical and economic factors. The great power politics in the region is underway and thus India has to increase its security and military maneuver as a priority. In order to gain the significant economic ground in the region, India needs to think in a positive manner and discontinue seeing the region in the light of its rivalry with Islamabad. Through increased security and economic move, the Indian business community will look at Central Asia as a region of vast opportunities rather simply as a region of returns.

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## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Younghusband expedition was British expedition to Tibet that began in December 1903 and lasted until September 1904 under the leadership of Francis Young Husband. The main motive behind this expedition was to counter Russia's perceived ambitions in the East side of British India. For more details, see Mehra, Parshotam. (2005). *The Younghusband expedition (to Lhasa): An Interpretation*. Gyan Publishing House: New Delhi.
- <sup>ii</sup> It is a historical region in Russia including the territories adjacent to the flow of Volga River. This region has been divided into four sub regions but in the modern Russian Federation, the Volga Region is associated with the Volga Federal District and Volga economic region rather different entities. For more details, see Peterson, Phillip A. (1996). *Russia's Volga Region*. Potomac Foundation.
- <sup>iii</sup> Oliphant, Craig. 'Assessing Russia's Role in Central Asia', 6 November 2013, Foreign Policy Centre (FPC). Available at <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?lng=en&id=172418>. Accessed on January 3, 2014.

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- <sup>iv</sup> US military installation at Manas International Airport near Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, operated by US Air Force. For full details see Nichols, Jim. (2010). *Kyrgyzstan: Recent Developments and U.S. Interests*. Diane Publishing: Darby.
  - <sup>v</sup> Roy, Meena Singh. 'India's Interests in Central Asia'. Available at <http://www.idsa-india.org/an-mar-9.01.html>. Accessed on January 15, 2014.