

The Role of India in “New Great Game” of Central Asia

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Abstract: *The "Great Game" refers to the historical rivalry between Tsarist Russia and the British Empire in Indian-subcontinent and Central Asia. During 19th and 20th years the Central Asia and Indian-subcontinent was a turf of the power game between the historically known Empires British and Tsarist Russia. In 19th Russia got control of whole Central Asia till the 1990s, by this, the old Great game comes into an end. After the disintegration of USSR, all countries of the world established diplomatic relations with the Republics of Central Asia, but it was only after US intervention in Afghanistan that all countries of the world show their interest in making good relations with these Republics. Therefore, after the 9/11 event new great game started between regional and world powers in the region. The main objective of this study is to analyze the role of India in Central Asia after the US intervention in Afghanistan after 9/11 and subsequent withdrawal in 2021.*

Keywords: Strategic, Great Game, US Intervention, Central Asia

1. Introduction

The "Great Game" refers to the historical rivalry between Tsarist Russia and the British Empire in Indian sub-continent and Central Asia. The term "Great Game" basically means tussle between two or more countries to gain supremacy against other countries in a particular region. During 19th and 20th Century, Central Asia and Indian-subcontinent was a turf of the power game between the historically known Empires British and Tsarist Russian, and the Territory of Afghanistan used to provide a buffer to avoid the direct confrontation between these powers. Although the term “Great Game” was first used by an officer of East India Company Arthur Connolly, The concept of "Great Game" or the "Great Power Game" was popularized by the writer Rudyard Kipling in his novel “Kim” published in 1901. During this period there was a fear in minds of British officials of the company from the rising advancement of Tsarist Russia into khanates of Central Asia might prove extremely detrimental to British interests in the Indian sub-continent. Therefore, during the old great game in Central Asia, the British and Russia were the main players but in New Great Game there are many players in Central Asia whom between the games of increasing its influence in Central Asia is going on. [1]

The Central Asian region is strategically important for world powers since a long time, history had witnessed that many great empires of the world had conquered Central Asia to gain the strategic upper hand in Asia and Europe. After World War second Western powers continuously tried to free the Central Asian region from communist Russia. After 1889 USSR had begun to develop cracks because its economic conditions were not good in this period and also Russian control had weakened on Afghanistan 1989 onwards then Western powers became successful in pressurizing USSR to give independence to the Central Asian Republics. Finally, in 1991 most of the Central Asian Republics get independence from USSR. But the influence of Russia remains continuously growing in Central Asia because the economies of these Republics are still connected with Russia. The event of US intervention in Afghanistan

changed the whole geopolitics of the region. Central Asia gets the attention of the whole world. The new regional and international players start playing their role in the region.

Central Asia is located in the immediate neighborhood of India. From past centuries the developments in the region of Central Asia have direct implications on the Security of India. Therefore, India cannot effort to ignore the region anymore. The large scale involvement of India in Afghanistan after US intervention makes the region more important for India to secure their interests. Besides this, in Central Asia, India has huge scope to gain benefits. But the late entry of India in the Region had brought her in a disadvantageous position. China a strategic revival of India is in a better position as compared to India and is investing on a huge scale in the region so that it can keep other countries at bay. [2]

Putting Things in context, the study analyzes the role of India in Central Asia after the US intervention in Afghanistan after 9/11 and its subsequent withdrawal from Afghanistan. This paper also makes a humble attempt to analyze the role of world powers other than Russia in Central Asia, in changing the geopolitics of the region.

Geo-Strategic Significance of Central Asia:

Central Asia is one of the pivot regions of the world. It is located in the center of the Eurasian continental space and is an important link between several robust and dynamic economies such as China, the European Union, India, Japan, and Russia. According to Khwaja, "Central Asia owes its importance to turning into a world economic center."

In new energy atlas of the world, Central Asia is located in a strategic region, with strong ties to neighboring regions. The development of Central Asia depends upon its access to the rest of the world. Central Asia is an important part of the political and economic world system, being “surrounded by some of the most dynamic economies in the world, including three of the BRIC countries Russia, India, and China. Because of these special features of the region, it becomes a

favorite location for great and regional powers of the world, where they are interested to increase their influence. [3]

Further, the new Central Asian states reflect their economic and demographic potential, geographic location, the character of their relations with other states, primarily with neighboring ones, as well as their role in regional and global international organizations. Over 55 million people live in this region, which is quite rich in natural resources and in economic, scientific and technological potential. With the completion of Trans-Asian railway projects and the development of road and air communications, the trade and economic significance of Central Asia will increase further as it will serve as a route for considerable cargo flows to Asia and the Pacific region to Europe and West Asia, as well as from west to east.⁴ Most of the CARs have vast oil and gas reserves. It also has cheap hydro energy reserves, especially in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. This has attracted the attention of various countries, including India. A number of companies from Russia, the United States, Turkey, Iran, and others are competing for the right to extract and ship the Kazak oil and Turkmen natural gas to worldwide markets. In fact today Central Asia has become a critical area in the foreign policy of the West, South and East Asian countries. The US has provided a new direction to cementing a new partnership with some of these former Soviet Republics. Russia itself is trying to build a new cooperative framework and China is no exception to this trend. India is making a serious bid to forge new equations with countries in Central Asia. Countries like Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan are also making efforts to create a position of influence in this region. Japan and South Korea are establishing economic ties with these Republics. India, as an emerging regional power in South Asia, is naturally interested in any changes occurring within or close to the region, which may have implications for its security. [4]

“Great Game” in Central Asia:

A great game was a political and diplomatic confrontation between the British Empire and the Russian Empire over Afghanistan and neighboring Central Asia during the 19th century. Russia was fearful of British intentions over commercial and militarily inroads in the region and equally British was fearful of Russia adding “the Jewel in the crown,” India, to the vast empire that Russia was building in Asia. This resulted in the atmosphere of mistrust and the threat of war between these two empires. Britain made it a high priority to protect India by applying all approaches and a great game is all about how the British protect India from Russia during that period.

The great game began on 12 Jan 1830 when Lord Ellenborough, the President of Board of Control of India, tasked Lord William Bentinck, " the Governor General, to establish a new trade route to the Emirate of Bukhara. Britain intended to gain control over Emirate of Afghanistan and make it a protectorate and to use the Ottoman Empire, the Persian Empire, the Khanate of Khiva and the Emirate of Bukhara as a buffer states between both the empires. This would protect India and key sea trade routes from Russia. On the other hand, Russia proposed Afghanistan as a Neutral Zone. This results that Khiva, Bukhara, and Kokand was conquered by Russia.

Historians considered the end of the Great Game to be 10 September 1895 with the signing of Pamir Boundary commission protocols when the border between Afghanistan and the Russian empire was defined. The 1901 novel *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling made the term popular and introduced the new implications of great power rivalry. It becomes even more popular after the 1979 advent of the Soviet-Afghan war. [5]

At the time of disintegration of USSR and independence of Central Asian region in the early 1990s, the influence of all major players of the world is all most over in this strategically important area of the world. But after the intervention of the USA in Afghanistan the region again came in limelight but this time in a new way, the regional and world powers never see the region strategically important but also economically. The availability of natural resources and the location make it a favorite place of all western and Asian powers.

The gaining of influence in the 19th century and today is totally different by one other during that period it was by controlling the particular area by its military might but now gaining influence means making the region economically close to itself so that other country cannot make use of this region against their national interests. Currently, it is USA, Russia, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and European Union whom between the tussle for gaining upper hand in the region is going on in the area. [6]

Relations between India and Central Asia:

After attaining independence, India was left devoid of any overland route connecting it to Central Asia. The direct access routes that existed were those of the traditional Silk Route, in which India was disconnected from Central Asia after Pakistan was formed. Added to this, Kashmir, which served as a linking region, lost its connectivity to Central Asia due to two developments. The first was the Pakistani occupation of the Kashmiri territory of Gilgit-Baltistan, which bordered Afghanistan on its northwest and Chinese Xinjiang (an import transit route to Central Asia). The other was the coming of the Chinese Communist party to power, which ended Silk Route trading between Ladakh and Kashgar (present-day Xinjiang, China).

The independence of India coincided with the beginning of the Cold War, following which the Indian leadership allied itself to the Soviet Union owing to socialist leanings and geographical proximity. Since these republics were part of the Soviet Union, the interaction was not significant as all of New Delhi's dealings were undertaken through Moscow. Still, the economic engagement was so shallow that, by the time the Soviet Union disintegrated and the New Central Asian republics formed a union, "the markets of the constituent parts of the new Commonwealth of Independent States accounted for only 1.5% of India's exports in 1992".

"India's immediate objective was to establish direct interaction with each of these new states. A major Indian initiative to establish contacts with the political leadership of Central Asia had been conceptualized a few months before the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991. This resulted in India hosting the first visit of President of

Uzbekistan in August 1991, followed up in quick succession by visits by President of Kazakhstan, in February 1992, President of Kyrgyzstan in March 1992, President of Turkmenistan in April 1992, and the visit of Prime Minister of Tajikistan in February 1993. Each of these visits resulted in the creation of a legal framework for interaction between India and the new Central Asian states. ” [7]

After 9/11 and subsequent events, India tried to make more robust and strong relations with Central Asian Republics. For that purpose India in recent years enhance its engagements with the region. India signed many agreements with Iran a neighboring country of the Central Asian region so that it can make good connectivity with the region.

India's Geo-Strategic interests in Central Asia:

The emergence of predominantly Muslim but, in fact, multi-ethnic and multi-religious CARs has added a new strategic dimension to the geopolitics of the whole of Asia and more so, for the countries located in its immediate neighborhood. Central Asia lies at the strategic junction between two nuclear powers, Russia and China, and at the interface between Russia and the Islamic world. It shares borders with Afghanistan, which is a major source of spreading religious extremism in the region. India has a vital interest in the security and political stability of this region. Obviously' given the Kashmir angle, India cannot be walled off from the political developments which take place in the Central Asian region. Any advance by Islamic extremist groups in the CARs could invigorate similar elements active in Kashmir. For reasons dictated by geography, India's strategic concerns are tied up with the regions bordering its north and northwest. Pakistan in its northwest continues to be antagonistic towards India. Pakistan is already sponsoring cross-border terrorism in Kashmir. For India, the Kashmir issue pertains not to four million Muslims living in Kashmir Valley alone, but to the peace and security of 130 million Muslims elsewhere in India. Therefore, for India the geostrategic importance of CARs is immense. Under no circumstance can India ignore this region. [8]

On the other hand, instability in Afghanistan has also adversely influenced peace and security in our region. Most countries in the neighborhood are convinced that extremists consolidating in Afghanistan under the Taliban will destabilize Central and South Asia. India apprehends that the Taliban's expansion will increase the pressure on Kashmir and extend Pakistan's strategic reach to the gates of Central Asia. Afghanistan and Pakistan continue to be the key actors creating destabilization in the CARs as well as in India. Should the destabilizing pattern of local conflicts as manifested in Afghanistan and some of the Central Asian states, especially Tajikistan continue unabated, the security environment of Southern Asia, already under severe stress, is likely to become more explosive. In the light of the aforementioned, India's long term strategic interests in forging closer cooperation with the Central Asian states should be obvious. Another point that needs to be highlighted here is that today the Central Asian region has become an area of immense importance to Europe, US, China, and Iran. The US is trying to undermine Russian and Iranian gains; China has committed billions of dollars for the

development of Central Asian oilfields to fulfill its future energy demands/Europe wants to extend its influence by means of NATO expansion eastwards and through the Partnership for Peace (PFP) programme. All this is likely to bring in high-stakes power politics in Central Asia. This obviously has implications and India must consider whether these developments are desirable or not. The question that concerns India is that any external influence in CARs will have serious implications, direct or indirect for the countries of the region. "Related to the geostrategic significance of CARs is the problem of religious extremism/terrorism or what Central Asian states call political Islam and the problem of drugs and arms trafficking.

The financial success of other countries in Central Asia is a consequence of their investment, an area which India has not yet considered seriously. In the year 2000, it was decided to set up a few pilot projects in Central Asian countries every year. Right now, a tool-room center in Turkmenistan by HMT has been set up and also technical cooperation programmes have begun. The idea behind this is that India will be setting up a center of excellence there. They have a polytechnic where theoretical education is imparted. But the tool-room immediately adds a practical edge to the whole thing. Not only can the students, budding entrepreneurs, people who want to set up their own business also benefit from the Indian tool-room center. Likewise, every year, one project in one Central Asian country will be set up. This is going to be an on-going series. [9]

The Role of India in "New Great Game"

Central Asia comes under "extended neighborhood". The region features very high in India's foreign policy especially after US intervention in Afghanistan. India shared historical, Cultural relations with Central Asia from the past 200 years. Right from the Kushana Empire in ancient India to the medieval age, the connectivity between the two was very high. During the Cold War period, India and USSR have strong and robust relations with each other; therefore, India was the only country who has a consulate in Tashkent the capital Uzbekistan. After the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, followed by the emergence of five new independent nation-states namely, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, India established diplomatic relations with each of these countries. [10]

India did not take much interest in the region in the 1990s. However, the then-Indian Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao visited Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan to establish deep ties with these former Soviet states, which used to be India's largest trading partners before 1991. "The victory of Taliban in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s changed the geopolitical situation in Central Asia. The security of Central Asia and that of India got closely connected. The five newly emerged states were afraid of any destabilizing influence from Afghanistan, while India's concerns about Pakistan's search for 'strategic depth', forced Delhi to change its non-serious attitude towards Central Asia. ” [11]

Central Asia is an important region for all powers of the world, while the USA has been involved primarily to suit its Business, economic and financial interests, for Russia, the region is its strategic backyard and sphere of influence.

Likewise, the Central Asian Region is important for China also because the region is located in its neighborhood and has the potential to play a crucial role in its ambitious project "One Belt Road Initiative". Besides this, the region is rich in natural resources which have the ability to meet the energy needs of China.

Assessing the situation very carefully, India realized that it had to start playing a proactive role in the region's geopolitics. This was especially to keep a check on the cross-border terrorism which was sustained by fundamentalist forces and the rise of extremism in the region. The 9/11 attack was watershed for international politics. Once that happened, India chooses to cooperate with Central Asian states on various security and defense-related matters. India also supported the US in its Global War on Terrorism post-9/11 and provided financial assistance to the Northern Alliances. It was and still is in India's own best interests to have a secure and stable Central Asia.

India's access to the region is hindered by geography. There is no land border between India and the five states of the region. The presence of an adversary like Pakistan has always been a challenge for India to reach Central Asia. The reason why Central Asia is so important for India is that the region will help to maintain its status both as a 'regional power' and an 'emerging power' in the international system. Of late, it seems that India's influence in its 'immediate neighborhood' is diminishing with China's rising influence on each of India's neighbors. Even countries such as Nepal and the Maldives which used to have very cordial relations with India are now tilting towards China. Every country which aspires to be powerful or has become powerful in history has always had a 'sphere of influence'. India wants that sphere to be in Central Asia for two reasons. One, even if India loses out to China some influence in its immediate neighborhood and Indian Ocean Region, India could compensate it by having an influence in Central Asia. Secondly, if India manages to keep things intact in its neighborhood and also increases its influence in the Central Asian Region, that would make the situation even better for India. In both cases, it would be a 'win-win' situation for India.

India's overall approach towards Central Asia can be assessed by her Connect Central Asia Policy. This policy formulated in the year 2012 at the first India-Central Asia Dialogue at Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, outlines a few key elements of India's relations with Central Asia. It talks about political relations, economic relations, defense co-operation and building ties in the energy sector.

In his statement at Bishkek, India's Minister of State (External Affairs), E Ahmed outlined the policy by making a noteworthy remark, "Central Asia, over the last two decades in general and recently in particular, is witnessing an unprecedented integration into the global economic and political mainstream. We, in India, rejoice in this trend of the expanding influence of Central Asia, particularly on the world energy scene. We recognize Central Asian countries as close political partners in our 'extended neighborhood', a

precept which has become a key element of our foreign policy".

India's admission into the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO) in June 2017 is a step forward towards engaging more deeply and holistically with the region. SCO is one of the most important regional organizations in which India was admitted as an observer way back in 2005. India has shown deep interest in the region and the government-to-government i. e. G2G interaction has increased. This has been visible under the present government headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi when he visited all five Central Asian states in July 2015. This was the first time an Indian Prime Minister had visited all Central Asian states post-Soviet Union breakup.

India's economic success in recent times has changed the nature of its ties with the region. The attractiveness and capacity for India's involvement in the region have grown. India's engagement with the region has faced obstacles due to lack of land access routes, competing interests of China and US hostility towards Iran". Iran has become extremely crucial as it provides India a gateway into the region through the Chabahar Port. India will literally bypass Pakistan to move well to Central Asia and beyond.

2. Conclusion

In post-US intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, India showed a keen interest in Afghanistan and play a major role in being peace and development in the country. As Afghanistan is a highly volatile country and the interests of India is deeply involved in the country. Central Asia is located in the neighborhood of Afghanistan emerged as a major player in Central Asia. The involvement in Central Asia on the part of India is expected to increase even more in the coming years because the region has potential to harm its security and the influence of any country in the region can be detrimental to the security at the Western Border of India. India has a well defined and well-articulated foreign policy towards the region. Consequently, the CARs did not figure prominently in the Indian Foreign Policy. The New Great Game had played a major role to metamorphose India's engagement with Central Asia. Realizing its omissions, it launched various official frameworks such as "Extended Neighbourhood", "Immediate and Strategic Neighbourhood" and the "Look North Policy" and the latest 'Connect Central Asia' for making its space in the region.

From the past many years, India is increasing its presence in all counties of Central Asia. The trend will get momentum once private players will join in the region and the Chabahar port gets fully operational. Then, India will play a much bigger role in the region and Compete with the other powers especially China. But due to USA sanctions on Iran in recent times, the situation can go reverse in Central Asia. Then it becomes imperative for India to develop alternative ways to connect with the region.

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