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‘Politics’ of geopolitics and geoeconomics in central Asian regions (cars)

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Abstract

International relations describe the relationship between two countries as based on the level of interactions on subjects such as economy, military, law, environment, etc. These relations can have 'strategic relation', 'economic relation', 'political relation', 'bilateral, multilateral relation etc. Geopolitics describes a broad spectrum interface between two disciplines, Geography and Politics. It reflects the effects and implications of geography on international relations and subsequently on international politics at large. Geopolitics is increasingly used as a tool of studying foreign policy to understand, predict, and interpret international political behaviour through geographical variables. It is noted that numerous regions across the globe have caught new geopolitical dimensions. The region of Central Asia, for that matter, has acquired urgent and utmost attention, highlighting its strategic significance. In forty years of reform and implementation of open economy policies, great changes have taken place in China. With the country's high engagement with the world, it became obvious that China did not isolate itself from the global developments. The geopolitical importance of the Central Asian Region (CAR) can be further understood by the fact that it has been labeled as Washington's 'Greater Middle East,' Russia's 'Strategic Backyard,' and China's new 'Far West.' The growing role of various organisations, including international and regional organizations like the UN, NATO, and SCO, coupled with multiple interests of individual countries in the region, has mirrored a deep expression of a new great game in Central Asia.

Keywords: Geopolitics, geoeconomics, central Asia, international relations

Introduction

Subsequent to the demise of the Soviet Union, the emergence of Central Asian republics being identified as sovereigns and the related reluctance of Russian state in the aftermath of the collapse of USSR triggered a strategic vacuum in the region. In this backdrop, many regional and trans-regional forces attempted and endeavoured ceaselessly to fill this vacuum on myriad occasions. Parallel to their efforts, on the other side these sovereign republics were striving to establish ties with foreign powers and other multilateral organisations to secure their newly-founded independence and national identity. Gradually the game seemed altering that eventually attracted the major powers towards the region.

Today the geo-strategic position of central Asian Region (CAR) is dictating the strategic interests of major powers in terms of energy, security, development and so forth. There are certain factors which are inviting the attention of traditional as well as of emerging actors. The region is introducing the geopolitical as well as geo-economic scenario. It's geopolitical location unfolding geographical proximity with South Asia accompanied by an impressive possession of energy resources, primarily oil and gas and other natural resources like uranium and hydrocarbons have mounted the prominence of the region for every country to achieve the strategic ends.

The historic and distinctive geopolitical location of the CAR sandwiched between Russia and China, has recorded sizeable presence of trans-regional powers since the dismantling of the Soviet Union. Moreover, in the post-September 11 attack the United States felt the need and gradually intensified its closeness with some Central Asian states to meet its strategic ends. It is important to define here what is this 'New Great Game'? A strategy of "Greater Central Asia" was launched when the United States (U.S) had decided to shift its focus directing towards Central Asian region with the key aim to abort the influence of Russia and China in

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the region. Subsequent to that, “The ‘New Great Game’ was developed in Central Asia involving Russia, America, Europe and China as key players as well as Iran, Turkey and Pakistan as regional players. America sees India as a balancing power of the involvement of Russia and China” (Usha, 2012:108) ^[17].

Notably, same confidence in India expressed by the U.S is felt in other regions as well, like in the Indian Ocean where the U.S seeks India to be a net security provider in order to check the elevated clout of China in the region. There is no dichotomy in acknowledging this fact that the increasing power projection of China across many parts of the world is an alarming threat for India as well as for the U.S. And reasonably, the China factor is clubbing India and the U.S on a common platform to curb this potential challenge in a collective manner.

On numerous occasions, this Central Asian Region (CAR) has attracted the attention of the global media because of constant existence of volatile experiences and extremism. The people of Central Asia are found surrounded with ample societal breakdown and economic hardships with slight hope of improvement while addressing future prospects. Undoubtedly the Central Asians have scoured a declining living standard since the disintegration of Soviet Union in almost every manner. From the very basic sanitation provisions to health

care and education, the people have dwelt under a precarious condition and worrisome regression. Perhaps most distressing among them is the recorded literacy rate and quality education which has steadily faced a severe decline in Central Asia since 1991. The amalgam of continual economic adversity and political suppression has originated breeding grounds yielding extremist Islamic movements and consequent tensions.

Geopolitical and Geo-economic significance of the Region: Ask not what you can do for Central Asia; ask what Central Asia can do for you. The dissolution of USSR is over and today after a span of twenty-six years Central Asia is comparatively a region of stability and reconciliation. Although challenges still exist there in terms of security and socio-economic conditions, but undeniably the troublesome region has converted into an area of abundant opportunity leading to the cultivation of a conducive outcome. The republic states of Central Asia who ceaselessly struggled at the inception of erecting independent to be recognised as sovereign states are today increasingly independent gaining further dividends with their expanded political outreach beyond their physical boundaries. Geographically Central Asia is located between the two continents - Europe and Asia, both are considerably most profound markets for energy resources and interestingly Centre Asia retains that potent to serve their interest by possessing huge energy assets.

Most importantly, the region Central Asia is today connecting economies and becoming a transit channel between East Asia and European Union and vice versa for the supply of goods. The infrastructure development throughout the region in order to facilitate transportation of domestic and international products witnesses the successful foundation of Central Asia's sovereignty. It is analysed that slow but steady restructuring in the capacity of the transit corridors can further boost the level of trade in the long run. This possible development will while be welcomed by all

global major players, it will be opening new vistas for the CAR by deepening its integration with the outer world. But, to provide a pragmatic outlook to this approach, the degree of cooperation and integration on the regional level is a pre-requisite and inevitable. The five states of Central Asia Region, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have strived massively to accomplish their potential as a crossroads for trade and transit. Regional government's mutual trust, can effectively work together. Thus, the predicted Central Asian connectivity in this way can be upgraded.

Outreach of Regional Energy Assets

Energy is a vital factor behind linking Central Asian Region to the outer world to meet their energy demands. It is being observed that global energy demands are surging day by day as against the diminished level of supply. Meeting the growing demands for energy resources Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have today emerged as two main exporters of hydrocarbons. It is noted that Turkmenistan is endeavouring to diversify its gas policy. The much-highlighted Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline (TAPI) is counted as among the most decisive initiatives; construction of which is supposed to be completed by the end of this decade. Other important issue of Caspian Sea status could not get desirable attention and still unresolved. But the idea of linking Europe to the pipeline system of Central Asia is lately revived. Turkmenistan seems determined and its search is on to secure new markets with the aim of swelling its economy. Ashgabat wants to see its gas output hit 250 bcm per year by 2030 (Romanowski, 2015) ^[10].

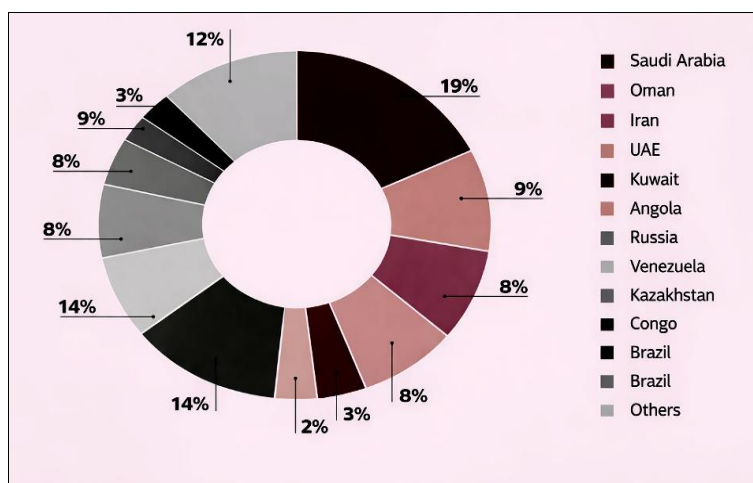
Raw material is not the single option and the cross-border energy transit is not merely limited to raw materials. In the year 2013, the total quantum of electric power being transferred to Afghanistan from Central Asia amounted to nearly 3000 gigawatt hours. There were high expectations that transmission lines of about 750 kilometres will be installed in the region. This sort of initiative could contribute in backing the CASA-1000 Project which is oriented with the aim of delivering hydropower energy from Kyrgyz and Tajik to Afghanistan and Pakistan. There is uncertainty about the materialisation of CASA-1000 project by 2018; but whether late the execution of this project would firmly enhance the regional collaboration, cooperation and connectivity while ensuring stability and tranquillity in the region.

India's Stance against China's growing influence in CAR: History reflects that the region of Central Asia has been a battleground for external actors to exert their influence in the region. Major Powers like the United States, Russia, and China have toiled to enter and sustain their presence in CAR. Their long efforts in this direction have made the region as a theatre rather than as a power. For centuries, the region has played a prominent role in the geopolitics of these major powers who sought to establish their foothold in the region. With a major alteration in the global power equations, China is emerging on the international stage as an unprecedented power showcasing its economic and political muscle. As far as Central Asian region is concerned, China has displaced Russia and overtook others including U.S in order to ascertain its influential presence in the region.

China's power projection across the world is increasingly becoming a big challenge and constant dilemma for India's national interest as well as for its security. In terms of civilisation, India can be found as experiencing much proximity with the region as compare to China. But in real sense India has been reluctant in exerting its geopolitical influence in the region. With this backdrop, India is attempting to make its presence felt mitigating the rising clout of China in the region.

Comparative Strategies and Foreign policy Vision of India and China in CAR: Central Asia region as called as the “centre of periphery” and the fall down of Soviet Union availed a privilege to China to enter into the region which was observed as a strategic boon for China's interest. China proved its efficiency in constructing deep ties with the regional states. It soundly understood the emitting issues

and problems associated with regional socio political and economic scenario of the region and acted accordingly. Contrarily, India lacked in doing so and didn't imbibe a suitable policy towards the region. And these drawbacks of India served China indirectly to discover a fertile space in the region to capitalise abundant opportunities that Central Asia could offer. China enjoys a bilateral trade of USD 50 billion with Central Asia in comparison to India's trade of USD 2 billion. Moreover China imports about 20 million tons of oil from Kazakhstan and 40 bcm of gas from Turkmenistan in addition to large quantities of uranium and other minerals from these countries. On the contrary, India has imported just around 3000 tons of uranium from Kazakhstan and its first acquisition of Satpayev oil block off the Caspian Sea shore in Kazakhstan commenced drilling operations (B2B 2017).

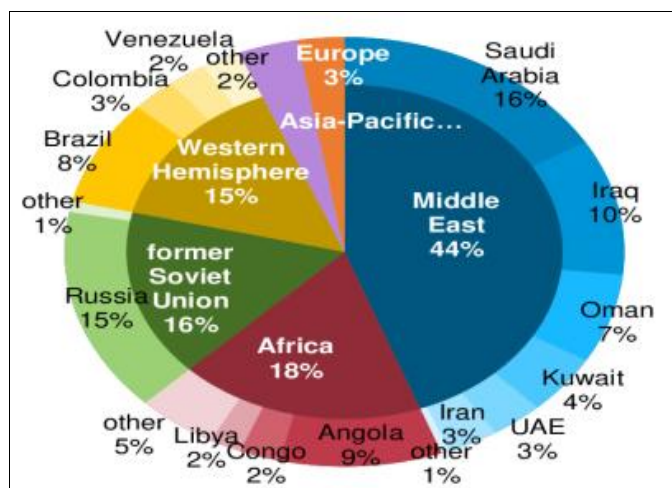


Source: US energy information administration, FACTS global energy, global trade information services

Fig 1: China crude oil imports by source, 2013

Central Asia where varied communities of traders dwell has recorded 2000 years matured relations with China. In the 21st century these historical ties have further enlarged. The Silk Route economic corridor in the contemporary times proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping during a speech in the year 2013 is direct signal of China's prolonged interest in the region. Additionally in the energy realm, oil and gas are the two important natural resources China has a

great dependency over. Presently, the region fulfils around fifty percent of China's oil and gas demands. Moreover, fifty percent of Kazakhstan's oil firms have shares with China. In the wake of rising demands of oil and gas, the natural resources have become a strong bargaining chip and it has consequently given birth to “resource nationalism” in the countries of Central Asian region.



Note: Figure composed by author using EIA data

Source: U.S. energy information administration (2020)

Fig 2: China crude oil imports by source, 2020

China is observed as proceeding smartly and this developmental move of China has changed the mental make of the regional countries as well. The perception of viewing all Chinese as “black Chinese” does no longer exist among the elite communities of the region as it happened earlier. Adopting unparalleled efforts, China has earned enormous confidence of the people over there. Of course, the situation is such that “Central Asian people like.

Russia cannot live without China.” But correspondence to this positivity, a major challenge is also being assessed in the region that can be proved as a potential setback for China. The creation of Customs Union unanimously by three countries - Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia on January 1, 2010 is expected to limit the dumping of Chinese products in their markets. This demonstrates that overly delivery of Chinese goods in their markets is not highly welcomed.

Historically, India has been linked to Central Asia through trading routes. India's relations with the Central Asian countries in the post-independence period were shaped because of Delhi's nearness to Kremlin. It happened especially after the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962. Gradually the collapse of Soviet Union brought a remarkable shift in the foreign policy of India towards the region and an active engagement of India being noticed with the five republics of CAR. Therefore, adopting a pragmatic approach by India moving from the ideological alliances Central Asia was now referred to as ‘our near abroad’. India's historical links and primary focus of engagement has been Afghanistan in this broader region. India has undertaken a multilateral approach in Afghanistan. Providing development assistance, India has emerged as the largest donor to Afghanistan in the region. Unfortunately, according to the expert's suggestions India's approach towards the entire region or all five republics of CAR is considerably less-consistent. In the year 2012, New Delhi had adopted a new ‘Connect Central Asia’ policy which signalled India's aspirations to foster its bilateral relations with all the regional countries on the contours of political, strategic and security cooperation. In this direction, India proposed to upgrade its existing engagements within Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and it also offered to initiate a new Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement to integrate its markets with those of Central Asian region to expand its outreach.

On the defence front, there are reports that India has set up an airbase in Tajikistan. To execute new planning the Indian Air Force was expected to deploy a fleet of MiG-29 fighter bombers at the Ayni airbase near Dushanbe. The airbase follows the establishment of India's first military “outpost” in Tajikistan at Farkhor, adjoining the Tajik-Afghan border. The location is important as it is close to the bases of anti-Indian terrorist groups as well as near the territory where Pakistan and China are engaged in military cooperation.

For keeping India's economy in motion, fulfilment of its energy demands is an important task which is garnering serious heed. Currently India sources almost three quarters of its oil consumption from abroad, much of it is imported from the violent-natured Middle East region. While the traditional definition of security has transformed, it has introduced energy security as an important factor in a country's economy. Thus energy security has become a key ingredient of India's national security and foreign policy. When India is becoming more reliant on imported energy,

reducing dependence over the volatile Middle East has become urgency. And subsequently searching of alternative sources of energy has become a vital concern. Central Asia contains vast hydrocarbon fields both on-shore and off-shore in the Caspian Sea. These are home to an estimated 4 per cent of the world's natural gas reserves and approximately 3 per cent of oil reserves. Most of these resources are found in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, although Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan also have potential for generating hydro-electric power. In addition, Central Asia has reserves of uranium ore plus the potential for its enrichment; so the region could be tapped as a source of uranium for India's civilian nuclear programme, which would in the long term help diversify its energy base (The Hindu, 2008). Central Asia is thus of prime importance in India's energy security policy. Over the past decade, India's state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) has sought to invest in Kazakhstan, which has three of the world's richest oilfields. ONGC acquired sizeable stakes in the Alibekmola and Kurmangazy oilfields in Kazakh-owned areas of the Caspian Sea (Center for Strategic and International Studies (2007).

More recently ONGC attempted to buy a share of US Company Conoco Phillip's holding in the Kashagan oilfield. However, although the Indian Government has begun investing in oil fields in Central Asia, its policy on how to transport this oil to the Indian market or work out oil swap deals is still evolving (Campbell, 2013)^[3].

Concluding remarks and recommendations

Strengthening of relations between India and Central Asia seeks mutual benefit of all countries involved. India is interested in expanding its ties with the regional countries as it will promote economic growth, security and tranquillity in the region. Furthermore, good relations with India will provide an assured market to these countries for their energy, raw materials, oil and gas, uranium, minerals, hydroelectric power etc. India is the fastest growing economy in the world today and can be a stable, assured, expanding market for these countries. While China appears well postured and assertive in the region, India looked less enthusiastic while extending its alliance with the regional countries. India must value its political influence across the world being the largest democratic country. And its swelling economy is also a positive factor in attracting the regional countries. It has been found that although countries of Central Asia aspire to have closer connections with India, but India seems not much energetic to materialise their aspirations. Indeed, India has introduced several initiatives and outreach programmes of building an e-network with five countries of Central Asian Region. Not confining to these achievements India has actively promoted cultural diplomacy too. And in this vein India has undertaken requisite measures too to architect universities and cultural centres in the countries of the region. But this doesn't indicate suffice measures to address the national interest of India nor to overtake China's growing presence in the region. For materialising the strategic interests in the long-run, India needs to learn the diplomacy China adopts and the way it understands the issues and problems emerging in the region. Briefly, India needs to project much assertiveness in the region blending its soft power diplomacy with the hard power to make the region recognise.

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