

Geopolitics in Central Asia: Implications for India

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Central Asia, Halford Mackinder's Eurasian Heartland, is witnessing yet another epoch of great power contestation. American strategic analyst Owen Lattimore's postulation elucidates the nature of the ensuing strategic brinkmanship in these words, "The world's new centre of gravity lies within a 1000 NM radius around Urumqi - a whirlpool which meets political currents from China, Russia, India and Middle East; it encloses more different kinds of frontiers than could be found in any area of equal size in the world".

The region witnessed the Great Game of the nineteenth century between Great Britain and Russia, which led to the emergence of Afghanistan as a buffer state. Later, in the 1980s, the new Great Game was underpinned by a proxy war between the USA - Saudi Arabia - Pakistan axis, which lasted until the exit of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan in 1989. Another phase of the Great Game began Post the 9/11 terrorist strikes against the USA and lasted until the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. Currently, the region is witnessing yet another phase in great power contestation, which has been exacerbated by the Talibanization of Afghanistan, and the Ukraine Conflict.

Central Asia owes its strategic importance to rich hydrocarbon, uranium, hydropower, and rare earth resources. Its salience also lies in inter-regional connectivity and as a buffer against the spread of the Jihadi crescent beyond the Af-Pak region. Afghanistan's geographic location forms a strategic bridge between land-locked Central Asia and South Asia. It connects the two regions through a web of trade and energy corridors. Access to this land-locked region is through the Northern Distribution Network from the Eurasian landmass in the North, or via the Bolan and Khyber passes on the Durand line from the South pass —through Jihadi strongholds. Indeed, Central Asia is the centre of gravity of China's much-touted Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The

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emerging transportation and energy corridors such as China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), the Chabahar-Zaranj- Delaram-Central Asia Axis, Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI), and the PowerGrid (CASA)-1000 pass through the region.

The other emerging conduits are the Persian Gulf Corridor, the Lapiz Lazuli Corridor, the Afghanistan-Pakistan-Wagha (India), and Tajikistan (via Wakhan) trade corridors, besides the Ashgabat trade agreement, which seeks to facilitate smooth intra-regional, and inter-regional trade. However, the ensuing geopolitical developments in the region, viz. regional security dynamics as well as the conflicts in Afghanistan and Ukraine, do not augur well for the realisation of these dream projects. Before dilating on the impact of the two strategic shock events, it will be pertinent to examine the geopolitical landscape of the region and the impact of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Ukraine on regional geopolitics.

Regional Security Landscape

Post their creation in the early nineties, the Central Asian States (CAS) struggled to acquire a new identity, and create the semblance of nation states. The Soviet-era communist elite leadership was at pains to forge a new identity in a society that has traditionally been based on ethnic and clan-based loyalties. The Jihadi renaissance in Afghanistan radiated to Central Asia (CA), exacerbated civil war in Tajikistan, and gave rise to orthodox Islamicist movements, like Hizb-ut Tahrir, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement. The rise of Deash created its own variant, like the Islamic Movement of Khorasan Province (ISKP), which seeks to bring the Sunni majority CAS into the fold of the so-called Caliphate. It goes to the credit of the syncretic CAS for having successfully warded off such extreme ideology.

However, on the flip side, regional stability is mired in lingering border, water sharing, and ethnic disputes. The contemporary geopolitics of Central Asia shows two contrasting trends. With the ascendance of Shavkat Mirziyoyev as the President of Uzbekistan, the resolution of border disputes in the Ferghana valley, and water disputes with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, have gained impetus. Other welcome developments are the institutionalisation of “Central Asian Heads of Summit,” and “Five plus One Summits” with China, the USA, and India, respectively. However, amidst these positive developments, the region continues to face geopolitical tremors. During 2022, while the region saw the high-profile SCO summit and visits, the clashes in January in Kazakhstan, the

Karakalpakstan uprising in Uzbekistan in July 2022, and the bloody armed clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in September 2022 in the Batken region have dampened the prospects of enduring peace and stability.

The periphery of Central Asia is also in ferment. The Uighur sub-national movement in the neighbouring Xinjiang province casts its shadow on China's bilateral relations with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; both countries have a significant number of Uighur diaspora with kith and kins across the borders. The other two important players — Mongolia, an observer in the SCO, and Iran, a new SCO entrant — are also facing social unrest. Turkey, another significant regional player, is positioning itself in a leadership role by reinventing its pan-Turkic identity through ideation, such as “One Nation and Six Countries” as well as orchestrating the Organisation of Turkic States Summits. While these geopolitical trends merit a close examination, what is impacting the region the most is the conflicts in Afghanistan and Ukraine.

Afghanistan Conundrum

The Talibanization of Afghanistan has emboldened Jihadi outfits to replicate the emirate system of rule outside Afghanistan. The Taliban have shown no inclination to accommodate the non-Pashtun in their governance structures, or heed international concerns on human rights and oppression against women. Poppy cultivation and drug trafficking have persisted as a major non-traditional security threat in the region. Economically bankrupt, about ninety-seven percent of Afghanistan is living below the poverty line. Media reports suggest serious differences are emerging among the Taliban rulers, particularly between the Haqqani network and Mullah Yaqoob on one side, and Habibullah Akhundzada on the other. There are more than 20 terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan, each striving for its own identity and objectives. ISKP has emerged as a major threat to the Taliban, and the group has unleashed sensational terrorist strikes against soft targets, including recent attacks against the Russian Embassy, the Pakistani Embassy, and a Chinese-owned hotel in the heart of Kabul. In Northern Afghanistan, the clusters of Central Asia groups and the Uighur groups pose a major threat to security in the Gorno-Badakhshan region, the Rasht Valley in Tajikistan, and the Fergana Valley — considered the very heartland of Central Asia. CAS are worried that, in the event of major terrorist strikes, it may not be feasible for the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to intervene militarily at a juncture when Russia is deeply embroiled in Ukraine. The friendly overtures of CAS towards the Taliban notwithstanding, they are circumspect about the Taliban and other terrorist groups operating

under or outside their tutelage, thus destabilising the region.

Tajikistan, the most affected front-line state in the CIS southern belt, has adopted a strident position against the Taliban. Due to close ethnic affinity with their Tajik kinsmen, who form the very backbone of the National Resistance Front (NRF), they have not only provided shelter to the leadership but also provided a venue for hosting the Herat Security Dialogue in November 2022 at Dushanbe. What emerges from the optics of the Herat Security Dialogue is that the NRF is receiving tacit support from the USA and some other European countries. However, barring Tajikistan, other CAS and Russia remain non-committal in their approach towards the NRF. The Front, on its own, vows to resist the Taliban and unite its 22 odd groups to carve out a federal Afghanistan in which each ethnicity has a major role in the provincial governance. For the moment, this intent appears far-fetched. The dynamics of the Northern Alliance were characteristically different from what the NRF is striving for. Pakistan, the elephant in the room, is getting its own taste of recalcitrant Taliban. They have vociferously contested Pakistan's control over the Durand line, and are using the Tehrik-e-Taliban of Pakistan (TTP) as a proxy against Islamabad. The Taliban have strongly reacted to the decision by Pakistan's National Security Committee as well as Pakistan Defence Minister and Home Ministers' statements to strike against TTP bases inside Afghanistan. The Taliban leadership has resolutely propounded a tit-for-tat policy against Pakistan. The geopolitical developments in the Af-Pak region point towards an escalation of conflict astride the Durand line, and plunge Pakistan deeper into an internal security crisis. Therefore, Pakistan's much-hyped dream of positioning itself as a regional geo-economics hub appears to be out of sync with the emerging geopolitical reality.

Ukraine Imbrolio

Post the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia continued to wield considerable influence in the geopolitics of Central Asia. Barring veiled attempts to assert their sovereignty and flaunting a multi-vector foreign policy, the CAS remained deferential to Russia's abiding strategic interests in its southern strategic underbelly. Russia dominated the entire security arena, be it air space, the deployment of troops along the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border, the manning of air bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, or even the very deployment of CSTO forces to combat terrorism. Russia received tangible support from the CAS at the SCO, and in the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union. Undeniably, China's forays in the region dented Russia's sway to some extent;

but even Beijing pampered Russia by describing Central Asia as Moscow's zone of special influence. Russia's military intervention in the garb of CSTO deployment in the January 2022 uprising in Kazakhstan enhanced its stature as a first respondent in its role as a net security provider. Earlier, in 2008, Russia's invasion of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and in the 2014 annexation of Crimea and Donbas, had caused consternation in CAS about Russia's propensity to use military means to protect its perceived core interests in Central Asia. However, CAS soon grudgingly adapted to the new normal to avoid antagonising Moscow.

However, Russia's military campaign against Ukraine has made the CAS nervous. Kazakhstan shares a 7644 km long and open border with Russia. Out of its nineteen million population, about three million are ethnic Russians, inhabiting mostly the towns bordering Russia. Likewise, there is nearly about five percent of Russians in the other four countries. President Putin had earlier spoken of the supposed determination of millions of Russian speakers living beyond Russia's borders to return to their historic homes. He had also reportedly stated that it was in the interests of the Kazakhs to remain in the greater Russian world. Two years ago, as per media reports, Russian ultra-nationalists had hung a banner on the Kazakh embassy in Moscow that proclaimed: "Northern Kazakhstan is Russian Land". Such actions reinforce Kazak's concerns about Russia imposing a referendum template in the Northern Russian dominant areas.

On the issue of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan abstained in the March 2022 UN voting, while Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan stayed away altogether. When clashes erupted in September between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, neither Moscow nor the CSTO was willing to salvage the situation. In desperation, the Kyrgyz leadership called off CSTO military exercises in October. At a Russian-central Asian Summit, Emomali Rahmon, the Tajik president, questioned President Putin for treating the region's countries as if they were still "part of the former Soviet Union". Meanwhile, Uzbekistan recently turned down Moscow's proposal to form a "natural gas union" with Russia and Kazakhstan. The CAS are averse to getting caught in the whirlwind of great power politics. It has, thus, become a daunting challenge for them regarding how to balance their relations, and pursue a multi-vector diplomacy. For now, while the USA has a very tenuous influence in the region, and Russia remains hugely distracted, China and Turkey seek to gain geopolitical influence through the reconfiguration of transit and energy corridors.

Geopolitics of Corridors

Traditionally, the Soviet era multi-modal and energy infrastructure made CAS dependent on Russia. Even in the drive towards diversification of the East-West pipelines — such as the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC), comprising of Western companies, Kazakhstan, and Oman, Russia has been a major stakeholder. Russia held a total monopoly over Central Asia's energy resources, purchased it at cheap rates for domestic consumption, and sold its own energy to Europe at higher rates. Russia is known for using energy monopoly as a tool of strategic coercion. Post 9/11, the USA made a major entry into the geopolitics of Central Asia. Besides, its attempts at socio-political re-engineering in the garb of Colour Revolutions, it has tried to diversify pipelines from the Caspian towards the West. The CAS countries were encouraged to construct trans-Caspian pipelines, and then, through a web of pipelines — the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and Nabucco pipelines — to export oil and gas to European markets, and bypass Russia. While these grandiose US designs remain a pipedream, China has emerged as a dark horse and has successfully capitalised Central Asian energy resources through the newly constructed web of pipelines to Xinjiang province, and further west into the Chinese heartland.

China's BRI has come as a boon to CAS to break open from its land-locked geography and connect with the markets in Europe, West Asia, and South Asia. Of the three main BRI corridors — the North Corridor through Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine to Europe; and the Southern Corridor need special mention. The Northern Corridor is somewhat stymied due to the raging conflict in Ukraine, and the Southern Corridor is merely stumbling along due to the fragile politico-economic scenario in Pakistan. In the evolving milieu the Central corridor passing through Central Asia via Turkey is gaining traction. Gauging Russia's embroilment, Turkey is re-engaging with CAS under its "Pan-Turkic bonhomie". It has signed contracts with Turkmenistan, with the intention of becoming an energy hub for the transportation of energy from Central Asia, and across the Caucasus into Europe. Kazakhstan is also contemplating supplying uranium to Western countries, using the Middle Corridor. In a way, this implies a subtle strategic weaning away from Russia.

China seems to have been planning to complete its new railway line connecting Xinjiang, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan in 2023. The new line would open a route from China to Europe through Turkmenistan, Iran, and Turkey, thus shortening the journey by some 900 km and eight days. The new line would provide an alternative, non-Russian 280 km route to Europe, costing

US\$ 4.1 billion, and be financed through a public-private partnership. Another railway project is a line connecting Uzbekistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan. A railway line already runs from Termez to Mazar-i-Sharif. The new stretch planned is of 573 km, and runs via Kabul to Peshawar, thereby linking up with the existing rail infrastructure. The two countries would get faster and cheaper access to the seaports of Pakistan. When completed, it will reduce travel time to around four days. With China's help, Pakistan's Gwadar port will turn into a shipping hub. China would also gain access to the Hajigak copper mine near Kabul.

From the Indian perspective, it is essential to examine India's role in Russia's pivot to Asia strategy. Having realised the limitations of its accommodation in the European security and economic architecture, Russia has decided to deepen its engagement with India and China, the two large Asian economies, markets, and energy consumers. It seeks Indian collaboration in the development of the Far East and the Arctic region. Prime Minister Modi has articulated India's Act Far East policy, pledged US\$ 1 billion for the development of the Far East, and impressed upon the need to fast-track operationalisation of the Chennai-Vladivostok multi-modal corridor and INSTC — linking it with Chabahar Port. Once these corridors become functional, India's outreach and influence in Eurasia will be significantly enhanced.

Implications for India

The growing areas of convergence between India and CAS include enhancing regional connectivity, regional security, political stability, energy security, socio-economic development, soft power engagement, and people-to-people contact. Other significant areas include combating extremism; the prevention of terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and arms smuggling. Both sides benefit from the CA 5 Plus mechanism. At the first India-Central Asian Summit (held on 27 January 2022), Prime Minister Modi emphasised the mutual need for regular interaction and the preparation of a comprehensive road map for integrated development. Further, during the Foreign Ministers SCO Summit (held on 27 and 28 July 2022), India reiterated its position on stability in Afghanistan, zero tolerance for terrorism, and cooperation to operationalise the Chabahar Port for boosting connectivity in the Eurasian region. India also opposed Pakistan's overtures to invite the Taliban to represent Afghanistan as an SCO observer member. At the Defence Minister's SCO Summit (24 August 2022), India's Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh, called upon SCO members to eliminate terrorism in all forms and reiterated India's commitment to a peaceful,

secure, and stable Afghanistan. He urged for national reconciliation through dialogue and the denial of Afghan territory as a safe haven for terrorists. He further proposed workshops on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, risk mitigation, and the creation of disaster-resilient infrastructure. Again, at the SCO Summit at Samarkand (15 and 16 September 2022), India showed its commitment to the peaceful settlement of differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation. India's Foreign Minister, Dr. Jaishankar, further urged the development of common principles and approaches to form a unified list of terrorist organisations, and seamless transit and showed happiness that Varanasi would be a venue for various SCO cultural activities. During the SCO heads of states summit, Foreign Minister Jaishanker impressed every one that connectivity projects should respect the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of member states, the need for connecting Chabahar Port with INSTC, and cooperation on Climate Change. India abstained from signing the Joint Communiqué for commitment to BRI. During the India and Central Asia NSA Summit (6 December 2022), the focus of deliberation remained on connectivity projects to be consultative, transparent, and participatory with respect to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states, and countering terror financing.

Other deliberations included the prevention of the misuse of technology, cyberspace and information space, and combating the arms and drug trade. The need to go beyond physical connectivity, and explore digital connectivity in areas such as tele-education and telemedicine, was also noted. The participants further noted that multilateral forums, such as SCO, CICA and EEU, are vital in improving linkages. In the cultural arena, the young generation should be made aware of the shared heritage through enhanced media sensitisation. As regards the shared Buddhist heritage, urgent steps are needed to restore, protect, and document edicts as well as other historical and cultural sites in the region. The potential of tourism, medical tourism, healthcare sectors, and enhanced air connectivity, was emphasized. It was noted that building a strong investment relationship between India and Central Asia needed to be prioritized; for India, the Central Asia region is a gateway to CIS and European markets.

Conclusion

A nuanced understanding of the above geopolitical developments is imperative for India to review and recalibrate its Central Asia strategy. It must be recognised that China wields exponential influence in Central Asia, and Russia's

presence is on a relative decline. Also, strategic geography constrains India and, in contrast, provides a competitive advantage to Turkey, the Taliban, Iran, and Pakistan to develop new transit corridors. India aptly considers Central Asia as its strategic neighbourhood. Our civilizational ties, similarity in world views, and the congruence of strategic interests need no emphasis. India is bestowed with a profound geography that imparts the advantages of playing a role in the Eurasian and the Indo-Pacific strategic space. The CAS perceive India as a benign strategic balancer in Eurasia and expects India to play a more active role in regional geopolitics. Thirty years of India's relations with the CAS have been a momentous journey of friendship and cooperation. India's Connect Central Asia Policy is comprehensive and contains all the domains of bilateral and multilateral cooperation. What matters most now is to gain direct connectivity to the region and assiduously deepen our bilateral and multi-lateral cooperation to mitigate common challenges and enhance shared opportunities.

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