



INDIA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS AND NEW GREAT GAME IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract

The Central Asian Region (CAR) is playing a strategic role in world politics since its creation as a new geopolitical region. The geographical location of the Central Asian states has made this region extremely pivotal. It is a connecting bridge and transit route between different regions of Asia and between Europe and Asia. Even though, India shares historical linkages with the Central Asian region during the Kushan and Mughal era but failed to realize the significance of the region for its rising global interests after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. However, the 2015 official visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to five Central Asian republics explains India's foreign policy shift towards the extended neighbourhood. India adopted Connect Central Asian Policy (CCAP) to strengthen energy, economic, political, security, strategic and cultural relations with Central Asian states. India also became part of the New Great Game politics in the region along with Russia, China, the US, Turkey, Pakistan, EU and Iran by joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). India- Central Asian partnership can play a significant role in strengthening India's position in the world order and normalizing the current situation in Afghanistan. The main objective of this paper is to explore the importance of the geographical location of the Central Asian region through Mackinder's Heartland theory. It also discusses India's geopolitical interests and great game Politics in the Central Asian region.

Keywords: India, Connect Central Asian Policy, Heartland, Energy and New Great Game.

Central Asia: History, Identity and Prominence

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan gained political independence and witnessed political and economic transition (Pomfret: 1995). The sudden downfall of the Soviet regime spawned identity crisis and international isolation for newly independent post-soviet states including new Russia and Central Asian states (Cummings N: 2013). Many states adopted Western-European democratic principles and associated with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU), whereas Russia emerged as a Eurasian power. With the common features of history, religion, culture, powerful presidency with authoritarianism, limited connection to the world markets, extremism and geographical location the five- Stans emerged as a Central Asian Region.

Even though they are landlocked countries, the region shares borders with emerging powers of the world (Laruelle and Sebastien: 2015). Today's Central Asia is surrounded by the Caspian Sea on the West, Iran and Afghanistan in the South, the Russian Siberia in the North, and the Xinxiang province of China to the East (Hiro 2011). Central Asia is often referred as *Inner Asia*, *High Asia* and five- 'Stans' in international relations (Cummings N: 2013).

The Central Asian region became popular because of its rich energy resources and its geographical location. Kazakhstan is a leading exporter of oil and uranium, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are major



exports of gas from the region. The Central Asian states membership in international and regional organizations such as United Nations Organization (UNO), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and SCO also made this region very prominent in the world (Laruelle and Sebastien: 2015). The presence of non-state and extremist actors like Al-Qaida, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT) also made this region very significant. Being in the middle of the Eurasian region and surrounded by dominant Islamic, Christian, Buddhist and Hindu civilizations of the world, the Central Asian region is the most convenient transit route for international trade and business. The strategic location and rich energy reserves invited many external players, which led to a new great game, rivalry and competition among Russia, China, the US, India, Pakistan, Japan, Turkey and Iran for supremacy in the Central Asian region.

New Great Game Politics in the Central Asian Region

The region experienced competition for hegemony and historical rivalry between the Russian and British Empire in the 19th and early 20th century, which is referred as the old great game. Since then, the region became a strategic point for rivalry among powerful states. Halford Mackinder proposed the *Heartland* theory to explain the significance of the Central Asian region in world politics. In his work "*Geographical Pivot of History*", he referred to this region as the *Pivot* area, which was located between the Russian empire and Magnolia, because of plenty of minerals, strategic location and vast cultivable lands (Mackinder: 1904).

Mackinder revised his theory and referred to Central Asia as heartland in his second major work "*Democratic Ideas of History*" in 1919. He divided the world into three parts: Heartland (Russia, CAR, E. Europe, Iran, China and Magnolia); Inner Crescent (Germany, Turkey, India and China); Outer Crescent (Britain, Australia, US, Canada and Japan) and called Asia, Africa and Europe as World Island (Mackinder: 1919). According to Mackinder Heartland is inaccessible for naval power because of its landlocked geographical position, presence of the Rimland and increased dependency on land and rail transportation. He believed that, whoever controls the Heartland will rule the World Island (Asia, Africa and Europe) because of its geographical propinquity. Based on the Heartland theory Mackinder proposed:

*“Who Rules East Europe-Commands the Heartland
Who Rules Heartland-Commands World Island
Who Rules the World Islands-Commands the World”* (Mackinder: 1919).

In 1904 Mackinder predicted the Russian empire as the potential power to rule the heartland region, but the collapse of the Tsarist regime after the Bolshevik revolution witnessed the power shifts in the region. Mackinder revised his theory and predicted Germany would rule the heartland area, however, Germany was defeated in the First World War and no other empire was able to extend complete control of the Heartland region except the Soviet Union. However, Mackinder assumptions never came to reality, because so far no one power was able to rule the three regions (Asia-Africa-Europe).

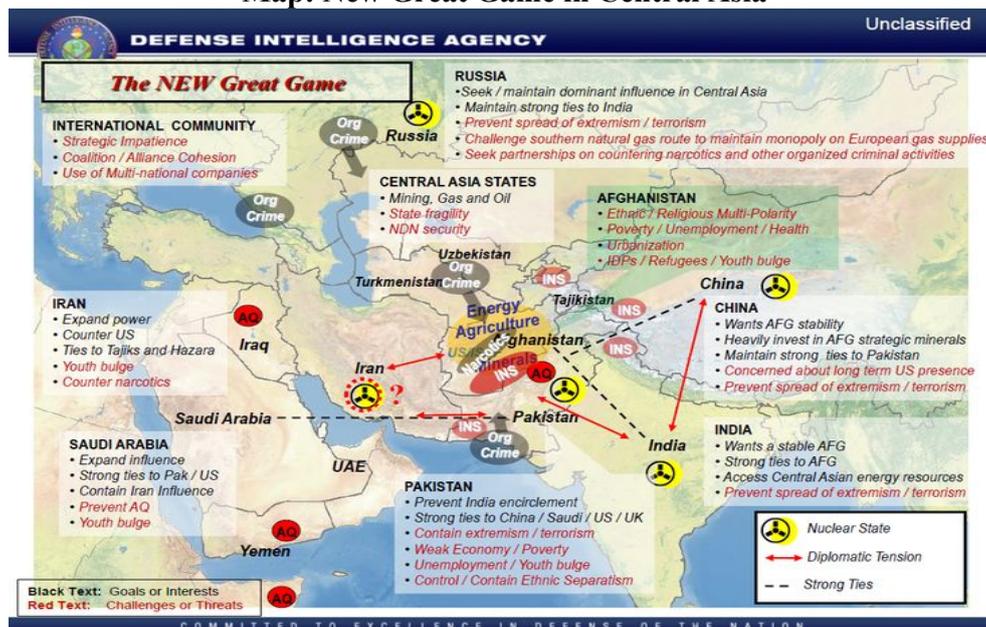
The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to geopolitical shifts in world politics (Kaushiki: 2013). Currently, the Central Asian states enjoy sovereignty, but they cannot avoid being the object of great power competition (Pomfret: 1995). The CAR received many superpower countries attention after attaining independence and emerging as a new region, which led to the new great game (Kaushiki: 2013). The new great game refers to the post-cold war period power rivalry in Central Asia among Russia, US, EU, China, India, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and Japan (Sajjanhar 2017).



The regions unique geographical location and energy resources invited many national and international actors into the CAR (Kaushiki: 2013). Each country has its interests in the region. Russia is the most influential power in the region, it has historical, economic and security-based interests. Since, the Central Asian states are part of the former Soviet Union, the presence of a handful of the Russian minority in the region plays a significant role in shaping Russian policy towards CAR. Russia's Neighbourhood Policy, Central Asian states membership into CSTO, EEU and SCO reflects increased Russia's presence in the region. Russia is successful in countering US-led NATO forces in the post-Soviet space through regional and multilateral alliances.

China maintains a solid economic partnership with the Central Asian States. Energy and economic cooperation are the major Chinese interests in the region. Countering extremist connections between Central Asia and Xinxiang (Muslim dominated region), balancing India and US influence in the region are also major security interests of China (Kaushiki: 2013). The implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the energy pipeline with Turkmenistan established China as the largest trading partner with the Central Asian states. China is very successful in strengthening its relations by launching a 5+1 engagement approach with Central Asian countries.

Map: New Great Game in Central Asia



Source: Defense Intelligence Agency, Afghanistan (2012).

Since the 9/11 terrorist attack, the US is trying to increase its presence in the region in the name of fighting against global terrorism. Stabilization in Afghanistan, countering extremism and Russia-China's dominance, and energy resources are primary interests of the US in the region. The US is also keen to promote Western values, democratic institutions, market reforms, and human rights in the Central Asian region (Kaushiki: 2013).

India also trying to increase its role and expand its influence in the region since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. Energy imports, security, economic cooperation, countering extremism and China's expansionist strategy are the primary interests (Sajjanhar 2017). India also adopted *Connect Central Asian Policy* to strengthen its relations with Central Asian states. India also initiated the



Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline to import energy from the Central Asian region (Muzalevsky: 2015). Other emerging powers like Turkey, Iran, Japan and Pakistan also increasing their role in the region, which led to competition and a new great game.

India's Interests and Connect Central Asian Policy

India- Central Asian states partnership and cooperation is based on historical and civilizational links (Sajjanhar: 2017). We can trace India-Central Asia relations through the links of Buddhism, Kushans, Babar and Mughal empires. The economic and cultural partnership between India and Central Asian states was continued when they were part of the Soviet Union. However, India is not very successful in converting historical and cultural links as a strong partnership with Central Asian states. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, India witnessed a paradigm shift in its foreign policy and diversified its relations (Sajjanhar 2017).

As part of global shifts in the post-Soviet period, India also rearticulated its foreign policy and initiated several policies to strengthen its position in the world. It adopted Look East Policy (Act East), Look West, Look North, and Neighbourhood Policy to strengthen its relations with regional and global partners (Kaushiki: 2013). In the last two decades, India witnessed massive economic growth, which placed India in a significant position in the world and led to competition with China in South Asia, Central and Southeast Asian regions (Muzalevsky: 2015).

India realized the importance of Central Asia as an extended neighbourhood. Peace, security, and political stability in Central Asia is directly linked to Afghanistan and India (Sajjanhar 2017). India initiated Connect Central Asian Policy (CCAP) during the India-Central Asia dialogue at Kyrgyzstan in 2012. The policy aimed to strengthen strategic partnership by developing trade, tourism, establishing hospitals, universities and other infrastructure facilities in the Central Asian region (MEA: 2020).

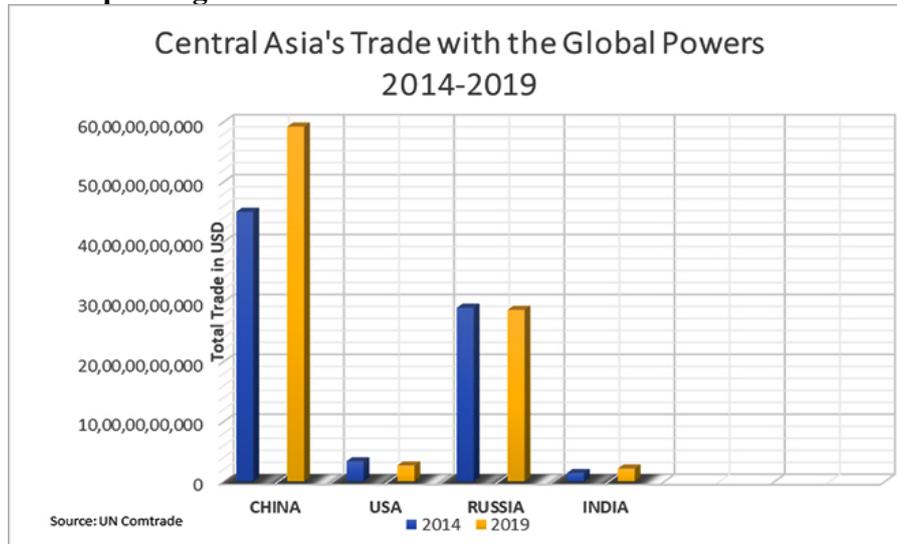
Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy initiatives in his first phase extended India's sphere of influence in the world (Mohan. C: 2015). His diplomatic visit to all five Central Asian countries sparked the relations between India and CAR. Under his leadership, India extended political, economic, and cultural cooperation through regional and multilateral groupings, which is aimed to develop regional connectivity and people-to-people contact. India also showed its interest in the region by participating in India-Central Asia Dialogue in 2019 and 2020 consecutively (MEA: 2020).

India's strategic, security, political, economic and cultural interests in the region are:

- Importing energy resources by completing the TAPI pipeline
- Strengthening connectivity through North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC) and the Chabahar port
- Enhancing trade and economic relations with all five Central Asian states
- Countering fundamentalism and terrorism in the region such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT)
- Security cooperation and joint efforts to stabilize Afghanistan
- Countering China's expansionist strategies in the region
- Extending cooperation in defence, information technology and education
- Developing infrastructure in the region (Sajjanhar 2017 and MEA: 2020).



Graph: Regional Powers Trade with the Central Asian States



Source: UN Comtrade in Bansal (2021).

India majorly exports pharmaceutical products, meat, boilers, machinery, nuclear reactors, coffee, tea, spices and electrical equipment to CAR. It mostly imports mineral fuels, oil products, salt, sulphur, iron, steel, gems and jewellery. Despite historical and Civilizational connections, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, India's engagement with Central Asian states was ignored due to several reasons such as lack of direct land connectivity and India's strained relations with Pakistan as a transit country (Sajjanhar 2017). Mostly, all the external players including India, Pakistan, US, Japan failed in the region in reaching Central Asian states expectations except China and Russia (Laruelle and Sebastien: 2015). Both China and Russia emerged as the largest trading partners with Central Asian countries. With its BRI and 5+1 approach, China outperformed India in all aspects in the region (Muzalevsky: 2015).

Conclusion

As an emerging economic power, India should encompass its sphere of influence in the extended neighbourhood including Central Asia, Southeast and West Asia. India has strategic, security, political, economic and cultural interest in the extended neighbourhood (Sajjanhar 2017). Even though India formulated Connect Central Asian Policy to increase its presence in the CAR it could not play a significant role due to geographical constraints such as Afghanistan and Pakistan blocking the way for the pipeline. India should develop a good relation with Afghanistan as a transit route between India and the Central Asian region (Kaushiki: 2013).

Except for Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, other countries' economies are very weak in the region. Central Asian states are facing numerous challenges even after two decades of independence such as corruption, unemployed youth, weak political system, fundamentalism, lack of infrastructure facilities, authoritarian regimes, environmental degradation, border issues, water scarcity, drug trafficking and political instability. India can take advantage by taking initiatives to develop infrastructure in the region to achieve its interests (Sajjanhar 2017 and Cummings N: 2013). India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to five Central Asian states in 2015 and its integration into Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2017 can outspread India-Central Asia relations beyond trade and cultural exchange.



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