



RESEARCH ARTICLE

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLIC

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ABSTRACT

Since times immemorial Central Asia has been a playing field for invaders who ventured forth from their own territories to stake their fortunes on this vast region. But with the demise of the Soviet Union these republic gained independence and are now sovereign states commonly referred as Central Asian Republic (CARs). Unexplored natural resources and their geo-strategic location have brought major powers to the 'New Great Game'. India with immense economic and strategic stakes in the region cannot remain isolated from the region because India enjoy tremendous goodwill amongst these republics. The author concentrates on the existing political and security environment in the CAR and assesses the strategic importance of the region for India.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of predominantly multi-ethnic and multi-religious Central Asian Republics (CARs) has added a new strategic dimension to the geopolitics of the whole of Asia and more so on, for the countries located in its immediate neighbourhood. 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 the region. Obviously Kashmir issue will compel India to be aware of political developments which are taking place in the Central Asian region. Any advance by Islamic extremist group 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 issues pertains not to four million Muslims living in Kashmir Valley alone, but to the peace and security of 130 million Muslims elsewhere in India (Stobdan, 2016).

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Therefore, for India the geo-strategic importance of CARs is immense. Under no circumstance can India ignore this region. On the other hand, instability in Afghanistan has also adversely influenced peace and security in our region. Most countries in the neighbourhood are convinced that extremists have consolidated in Afghanistan under the Taliban and will destabilise Central and South Asia. India apprehends that the entry of ISIS and Taliban's expansion will increase the pressure on Kashmir and extend Pakistan's strategic reach to the gates of Central Asia (www.stratfor.com). Afghanistan and Pakistan continue to be the key actors creating destabilization 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 need 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 fulfil 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 (Almaty Herald, 2000). Related to the geostrategic significance of CARs is the problem of religious extremism/terrorism or what Central Asian states call political Islam and problem of drugs and arms trafficking.

Weapons Proliferation

The Central Asian region is strategically located between two nuclear superpowers, Russia and China, as well as their nuclear armed neighbours Pakistan and India. Central Asia previously served as a raw materials base for the Soviet weapons program, with Kazakhstan holding large reserves of highly enriched uranium, while Kyrgyzstan has substantial amounts of nuclear waste scattered around. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan hold sizeable uranium reserves and the potential for its enrichment. This, coupled with the absence of special-detection equipment at border and customs checkpoints, rampant corruption and little political will, have the potential to render the region highly susceptible to and a lucrative route for smuggling fissile material. This has serious security implications as there is potential danger of proliferation of lethal weapons technology and material into the hands of not just states hostile to India, but also non-state actors like the Taliban, ISIS, al-Qaeda and groups like the IMU linked to them. This assumes further significance in light of a resurgent Taliban that will not lose out on the opportunity to use to its advantage the porous Tajik-Afghan border. Thus, in this region there is a serious threat of the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Routes. This has led to other illegal trafficking and can also be used for transporting components of WMD.

Religious Extremism and Terrorism

Today there are mounting security concerns in Central Asia and South Asia over rising cross-border and state sponsored terrorism; religious extremism/political Islam and ethnic unrest, coming out of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Terrorism is gaining prominence in the range of non-traditional threats in Russia, India and Central Asian states. It has assumed a new dimension with the formation of transnational ideological, financial and technological networks. These linkages have made terrorism a potent source of destabilization, both regionally and internationally. India is facing cross-border terrorism sponsored by Pakistan in J&K, Russia in Chechnya and Central Asia in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Meanwhile, there are reports that the terror groups have declared that the creation of new Islamist states in the CIS as their objective. They propose to do so with the backing of the fundamentalist Islamic movements in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and West Asia (Dadan Upadhyay, 1999). The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, (IMU), is said to be trying to exploit the considerable discontent prevailing among impoverished ethnic Tajiks who make up a majority of the population in the Fergana Valley. Recently it was stated that fundamentalist Islamic organizations were training young Uzbek and Tajik

guerrillas at camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Uzbekistan has recently accused three Pakistani organizations-Mezb-e-Harkat-e-Jihad (MHJ), Devas-UI-Ershad (DUE) and the Islamic Ulema Society (IUS) of clandestinely training hundreds of Central Asians at various centres in Pakistan with the task of carrying out terrorist attacks and destabilising the countries by overthrowing the governments (www.starfort.com). Growing violence along the southern belt of oil rich Central Asia has served as a stark reminder to leaders, diplomats and business that turbulence in the region is unlikely to disappear.

Violent turbulence in Afghanistan is affecting both India and CARs negatively. Afghanistan has become the source of fanaticism and extremism. The Taliban do not respect any international norms. In one of the interviews given by Ahmad Shah Masood in May 2000 to a Central Asian author, he said that "Afghanistan is only a starting base for the terrorists who stay in the territory controlled by the Talibs who train people for Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and other countries, in special camps, also with the experts from Inter-Service Intelligence of Pakistan (ISI) who carry out special military training. The purpose of this training is to create a global fundamental undergone movement in Central Asia, Russia to influence the situation in these countries. This process is already becoming a system, if not spontaneous, as it may seem. There is a well-planned strategy, and it is coordinated form one centre (<http://www.idsa-india.org/an-mar-9.01.html>). The US State Department, in its report on terrorism, also focuses on Pakistan and Afghanistan for sheltering terrorists. These countries have become the breeding-grounds for international terrorism. Afghanistan has become the hub for training foreigners for different countries like Pakistan, India, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and even citizens from China, (ethnic Uighurs from Xingjian) to carry out jihad and participate in military operations on the side of the Taliban.

According to the information given by some Taliban prisoners, 'madarssas' or religious schools supply students for the Taliban. The Uighur leave China with commercial passports for Kyrgyzstan or Kazakhstan. There they receive visas at the embassies of Pakistan and go further (usually via Karachi) to the designated training camps. According to Ahmed Shah Masood, "there are lot of terrorist camps located along northern boundaries, especially in Qunduz and Balkh". He further explains that at these places they prepare subversive operations against the states of Central Asia. A long-term victory of Taliban would make it easier for them to supply ideological, logistical and material support for Islamic militants fighting in Central Asia, Russia, China and India. It could also facilitate a significant expansion of narcotics trafficking, which is already a major source of instability in Central Asia (www.cursasianet.com).

Problem of Drugs Trafficking

Another problem related to terrorism, and one that confronts India, Russia and CARs is that of drug trafficking. A lucrative drugs trade in Central Asia poses a major threat to stability in Central Asia. Central Asia was hit hardest by the explosion in Afghan heroin. The Russian mafia, its ties to Afghanistan

established during the Soviet occupation, used their networks to move heroine through Central Asia, Russia, and the Baltics into Europe. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan developed important opium routes and became significant opium producers themselves. Hence, this region has become an invaluable areas of the global narcotics trade. These states are internally unstable and economically weak. An impoverished farming population of this region is open to growing lucrative drug crops as a way to feed their families. In the southern part of Kyrgyzstan alone, four million people are involved in the dealing, moving, growing or processing of raw material (Ahmed Rashid, 2002).

As a result Kyrgyzstan now exports more narcotics than Myanmar or Thailand. In the areas bordering with Tajikistan, drug traffickers have sorted tens of thousands of tons of opium and they are making their own underground labs for processing opium and heroin. They have now shifted to dumping the highest form of drug heroine in international markets. According to experts Afghanistan is exporting more than 75 per cent of the world's opium. According to the UN office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention (ODCCP), about 65 percent of the hard drugs coming out of Afghanistan pass through Central Asia on their way to world markets. Central Asian authorities intercept less than 5 percent of all drugs being smuggled through the region (Erika Dailey, 1994). The officers of Osh say that the drug traffickers of Central Asia are consolidating their pace, they are becoming technically sophisticated and have the most modern means of transport, arms etc., and they also have surface to air rockets with them (<https://www.coursehero.com/file/p60jch7/20-Ibid-21-Jumabaev-opcit-22-A-Perspective-for-Central-Asia-India-Relation/>). Criminal groups from Russia and the Caucasus form some of the most powerful drug mafias in the region. One of the most important trafficking routes in controlled by the IMU. Vast amount of narcotics from Afghanistan and Pakistan are transported to Tajikistan by the 725 km mountainous Kharogosh highway to the Fergana Valley. Here the drugs are distributed and redirected along several routes to Russia and to the west via Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Drugs are penetrating into Russia along two main channels. First, from the "golden triangle" of Southeast Asia via the Far East; the second from Southwest Asia – mainly Afghanistan and Pakistan – via Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Drug traffickers' routes have moved to the north: drugs are now transported to Western Europe through Tajikistan and Russia.¹¹ The annual revenue from this illegal drug turnover comes to approximately \$80 billion. It is the total gross income of two thirds of the UN member countries. Drug trafficking potentially poses a major security threat to the region. The poor state of border management and rampant corruption, coupled with soaring opium production in neighboring Afghanistan cost a dangerous trend. India needs to pay greater heed to drug trafficking, since much of the money generated is used to fund activities of extremist Islamist terror networks that possess the ability to foment trouble for India in the long run. This is an area where India has a broad overlap of interests with three other key players in the region : US, Russia and China, with whom it could engage in multilateral cooperation.

Indian Security Interest in CAR

The emergence of radical Islam in Central Asia in the light of the dramatic demise of the Soviet Union and its aggressive propagation of atheism, generated a great degree of unease. In New Delhi, the feeling was that if such tendencies were not nipped in the bud then they would eventually pose a serious threat to Indian security, especially in the state of Kashmir (India, 2003). Such fears have been seen in light of the increasingly close linkages that Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) have forged with the ISIS, Taliban and the ISI. It is a lethal combination of grinding poverty and unemployment along with social and political marginalization owing to corrupt and dictatorial regimes. It also provides a fertile recruiting ground for radical Islamist groups. Such developments certainly do not augur well for India's security interests, given the ISI's history of filtration with radical Islamist groups the idea is to disturb India's security and peace. This analysis is vindicated in the UNI report 3 April, 2000 which states that "Afghan and Pakistan trained mercenaries are seeking fresh pastures to exploit their brand of fundamentalism with Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan emerging as their new hot spots." Thus, the security of the entire region is closely interlinked. Given the increasingly trans-national nature of linkages being forged by extremist groups, especially with the Taliban in Afghanistan and the ISI in Pakistan, these developments have potentially serious security ramifications for India. Thus, this makes it imperative upon India to be more closely involved in Central Asia' regional security and ensure that instability does not spill over into Central Asia.

Central Asia is of vital importance to India not just in terms of energy security but also for reasons of national security. Given the transitional nature of these groups, including links with the ISIS and other militant groups in neighbouring countries, this generates a high degree of uncertainty in the region. This concern is exacerbated by the situation in Afghanistan. There is a prospect of increasing insecurity in Afghanistan following the NATO withdrawal in the future, which may spill over and destabilise fragile Central Asian states. Furthermore, India fears that a resurgent Taliban integrated into Afghan power structures post-withdrawal will be counter to India's interests. For these reasons India is keen to play a bigger role in Central Asia's security matrix and to prevent real and perceived threats to its national security. Over the past decade, New Delhi has ought to enhance its security assets in the region, notably through the acquisition of a first foreign military outpost in Tajikistan. Tajikistan is of particular concern for India since only a narrow 20 km stretch of Afghan territory separates it from Pakistan-administered Kashmir. India began to refurbish the airbase at April in 2004, reportedly spending \$70 million as part of its aid to Tajikistan. Although New Delhi never publicly announced its intentions, there was speculation in the media that a squadron of MiG 29 bombers and Kiran trainers would be stationed at the airbase (Marlène Laruelle, Sébastien Peyrouse, 2011). The Ayni airbase was seen by some as India's growing strategic aspirations and an attempt to project Indian military power in the Central Asia. Not only would it enable India to respond to crisis situations in Afghanistan and Central Asia, should its interests be at risk, it also increased

India's options in the event of heightened tensions with Pakistan, since it would enable India to strike at Pakistan from the rear. However, Russia, is still a major security actor in Central Asia. It appears to have been unwilling to sanction India's attempt to establish a military foothold in Tajikistan (Kucera, 2010). Perhaps fearful that this would open the door to US and NATO influence, it reportedly used its leverage over the Tajik Government to ensure that India did not deploy fighter aircraft at the base. After a decade of negotiations between New Delhi and Dushanbe in 2011 the Tajik Foreign Minister made negotiation with Russia to discuss possible deployment of the Russian military at Ayni, while also ruling out the deployment of Indian or American forces at the airbase. Despite this setback, India continues efforts to strengthen bilateral cooperation on security with Central Asian states. In recent years, it has shown signs of changing track in its military outreach to a more 'soft power' approach. In July 2011, the Indian Defence Minister visited Kyrgyzstan and announced plans to open a joint military research centre there, as well as an initiative to train Kyrgyz soldiers to serve in UN peacekeeping missions.

It was considered that lower-pacific initiatives like military hospitals and research centres may allow India military officers to build relationships with their Central Asian counterparts in a manner less threatening to Russia (Aloke Sen, 2003). When India's Vice-President visited Tajikistan in April 2013 and the Indian PM visited CAR in July 2015, both governments stressed the importance of cooperation in dealing with anticipated security threats from Afghanistan, and India has established Joint Working Groups on Terrorism with Tajikistan and Kazakhstan (Meena Singh Roy, 2003). However, despite shared concerns over security, there is little effective security cooperation between India and Central Asian states. Whereas Russia conducts numerous joint military exercise with these states under the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Collective Security Treaty Organisation, and China does to some degree through the SCO, there is limited direct collaboration with India's armed forces. India has joined the SCO which is one the most prominent multilateral bodies with regard to Central Asia, and the issue of counter-terrorism regularly features on the agenda of SCO summits. However, it is doubtful that India will be able to utilize the SCO platform to advance its own security interests, given the predominant Chinese influence within the organization and Beijing's sensitivity towards Pakistan, which is also an observer in the SCO.

Conclusion

India has a strategic stake in ensuring that Central Asian region remains geopolitically and economically stable.

India's interests make it imperative for the country to evolve a clear policy which can address both the existing and potential challenges that may erupt in the coming years. Indo-CAR relations are based on promoting regional security, bilateral trade, effective management of religious fundamentalism, terrorism and freedom from power rivalry. But, still there are certain challenges which India may have to face. First, CAR are not immune to the influence of the other nations so far political, economic and religious interests are concerned. Second, CAR is the chessboard for the new game. Still the influence of Russia is clearly seen in shaping their security policies. Third, the role of external power in CAR politics had made a more difficult to realize the objective of maintaining peace and security in the region.

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