

STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF CENTRAL ASIA IN 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

In the geopolitical and geo-economic scenario, the strategic position and possession of a state or region remains challenging issue as evident from the evolving strategic scenario of 21st Century international politics. These are the most influencing factors to invite the attention of greater powers in times of war and peace. In the changing paradigm of international politics, strategic position and possession can define the destiny of peace, security and development. This study is about the strategic significance of Central Asia and the theme falls within the realm of Strategic Studies. Central Asia being a landlocked region, has invited the attention of major powers and involved them in competition and conflict from the times of Heartland concept to the era of Global Chessboard. In this framework Central Asian region is considered to be of major strategic significance because of its geo-political position. In addition, the region possesses some of the important energy resources, mainly oil and gas, and access to them is of strategic significance to all involved – regional as well as external players. These strategic dimensions have kept Central Asia alive in the 21st century international politics.

Keywords

International Relations, Central Asia, Strategy, Geopolitics, Heartland, Rimland, Chessboard, Strategic Position and Possession, Hydrocarbons, International Politics, Geo-economics.

Introduction

The locational significance of a region or a state is an important aspect of strategic affairs in various interventionist policies in order to enlarge political influence across the borders. The concept of strategic significance emerged since late 19th century as an important discourse in conceptualising the international political developments and is still dominating factor in strategic scenario of international politics. The contemporary international politics is revolving around the geopolitics, geo-economics, strategic positions and possessions of vital resources rather than ideologies. States are more concerned with the national interest and promotion of national influence to meet the criteria of power. The elements of power are positioned in different geographical locations of the world and makes geopolitics and geo-economics more relevant with the international politics. Subsequently, the geopolitics as 'position' and geo-economics as 'possession of vital resources,' are the essentials of power politics and are strategically significant to sustain the life of

scientific states of 21st Century. In this framework, the study will find out the dynamics that had made Central Asia significant for invaders and traders in strategic scenarios of Great Game, Heartland concept, post-Cold War, Global Chessboard and post-September 11 scenario. It is believed that Eurasia to be a part of the world island, and Central Asian states as core of the Mackinder's designs, strategic and economic relations that will influence the world affairs, should be referred to as geopolitical and geo-economic, or together as strategic because their significance is global in nature. However, keeping in view the methodological reasons and research limitation, the study will be specific on geopolitical position and geo-economic resources of Central Asia and will analyze the growing strategic significance of the region for major powers (US, Russia, China and India) in the 21st Century.

There are catalogs of scholarly evidence in the form of academic research on the issues of geopolitics and geo-economics of Central Asia. But this study will provide comprehensive approach of geopolitical and geo-economic factors together in a conceptual framework to innovate the strategic significance of the region for major powers. Therefore, the main argument of this study is that why Central Asia being a landlocked region is contended by major powers and how they are engaged in expanding their sphere of influence in the region? As United States is physically too far from the region but is striving for strong presence in the region which is evidently opposed by Moscow and Beijing. They are politically allergic and feeling US long presence in the region as a strategic challenge. Even there is no direct land connectivity between India and Central Asian States but what had inspired India to put Central Asia on top of the agenda of its strategic policy of 'Going North' pertains to the interests in Central Asia's energy resources, minimizing Pakistan's influence, and establishing itself as a significant player in the relationship of outside powers within the region. Hypothetically, there is no equation between the landlocked region of Central Asia and the major powers like US, China, Russia, India and Pakistan on the issues of life standard, economy and technology. In short, what had made Central Asia significant for major powers to dissuade each other and strengthening their sphere of influence? In this strategic competition every major actor is intended to deter others' hold on Central Asian position and its energy resources. These statements will be rationally analyzed in a consecutive manner after defining the Central Asian region in a strategic context.

Central Asia: A Definitional Discourse

Central Asia is a term used to refer a vast area stretching from the Chinese border in the east to the Caspian Sea in the west, and from Russia in the north to Iran and Afghanistan in the south. Central Asia has a long past of being significant for invaders and traders since the days of Silk Route. At this instant, Central Asia has become an East-West and North-South connection bridge, and is earning privileged status. With the growing geo-strategic importance and potential source of energy, it has received increasing attention of the great powers throughout the history. It has been divided, re-divided, conquered out of existence, and fragmented time and time again. Central Asia served more as the battle ground for outsiders than the power of its own right. In 14th

century, the Moroccan traveler, Ibni-Buttuta, coined the name of the region as Turkistan,¹ which means the land inhabited by Turks. The idea of Central Asia as distinct region of the world was introduced in 1843 by the geographer, Alexander Von Humboldt. During the 19th century, Rudyard Kipling, a British writer, called Central Asia the 'back of beyond.'² The region is also known as the pivot of Asia.³

There are various views over the geo-political definitions of Central Asia. For classical world of the Greeks and Romans, Central Asia was known as Transoxiana⁴ or the region beyond the Oxus river now known as Amu darya. For Arabs, Central Asia was 'the land between two rivers' the Syr darya and Amu darya. To the English Elizabethans, the region was known as Tartary. According to the Chinese definition, Central Asia comprises the entire area beyond the Great Wall or western frontiers.⁵ In Indian context, Central Asia comprises the entire area beyond the Himalaya and Hundukush in north.⁶ According to Iranian conception, Central Asia consists of the entire area between the Pamirs and Ural mountains.⁷ Erstwhile Soviet Union had different definition for Central Asia as they never included Kazakhstan with the region. They preferred to give it a non-Asian identity by linking it closely to Russia and Siberia.⁸ However, in this paper the definition of Central Asian as given by the United Nations and European Union who consider it consisting the territories of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan,⁹ has been followed.

The locational indicators alongwith other dividends which have a direct bearing on the geopolitical scenario of the region, need to be summarized before proceeding further. These states are strategically bordering with eastern Siberia in the north to Afghanistan and Iran in south, from the banks of Volga to the Caspian Sea in the west and China in the east. Among these five states, Kazakhstan which means 'free rider'¹⁰ is the largest one as it occupies more than twice the combined area of all other four states of the region. Kazakhstan



sprawls over deserts that run from the Caspian Sea to the border mountains of China. Kyrgyzstan as the name of country means 'land of forty girls', as a reference to a group of maidens supposedly came here from Siberia, Settled around lake Issyk-Kul and founded the forty traditional Kyrgyz clans.¹¹ Tajikistan which embraces the high plains and mountainous ranges of Pamir is negligible in energy resources competition but strategically very important because of Ayni air base and also holds 57.7 percent of water share of the region. Turkmenistan is located between the Caspian Sea and Amu darya, with least population among the all five states. The state which has highest population is Uzbekistan containing about 45.39 percent out of total population of the region as per the census of 2012. Uzbekistan is the most powerful among the Central Asian states and strategically located at the heart of the region that runs from the Aral Sea to the Ferghana basin. The combined area of five states comprises of 18 percent of erstwhile Soviet Union and is about 4 million square kilometers larger than India and inhabited by just over 60 million people.

Strategic Significance in Geopolitical Dimensions

Strategically Central Asia lies at the centre of Eurasia and heart of Asia. It works as a bridge between Eastern countries to Western ones, connecting Asia and Europe. The significance of Central Asia is recognized for its geopolitical, geo-economic and geo-strategic position. Geography has made the Central Asian states a historical nexus for trade, competition and conflict.¹² It has become an East-West and North-South connection bridge. In addition to the strategic location, the Central Asian region has become the new global battleground of geopolitics and geo-economics for outsiders. Its history has been marked by more than 2000 years of conflict, as the great empires of the past fought to control the commercial lifeline connecting Europe and Asia, through Silk Route. Then in 19th century geo-strategic context, Central Asian states fall within the core of *Heartland Theory*, which was propounded by Halford Mackinder, in his 'Geographic Pivot of History' in 1904.¹³ Later Mackinder's theory of heartland was modified by Nichols Spykman in 1944 who gave it a different interpretation as *Rimland Theory*. According to this theory control of heartland and sea around the Eurasian landmass are equally important conditions to rule the world. In this theory Central Asia remains at the centre of gravity on strategic fronts.

In the post-Cold War era, the new theories and strategies have been developed in which Central Asia remains alive and important for the global power policies. Then after few years of Cold War, Zbigniew Brzezinski put Central Asian states on the map of *Grand Chessboard of American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperative* in which Central Asian states are in the 'middle space' of Eurasian chessboard and within the core of geopolitical flashpoint of international strategic dogma.¹⁴ Once in his articulation, National Security Advisor of US, Zbigniew Brzezinski, termed Central Asia an *Arc of Crisis* and after years, the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice viewed it as an *Arc of Opportunity*.¹⁵ Therefore, the region consists of positive uniqueness and it has been strategically promising ground for defence and attack actions in various wars. In the years of long Cold War this territory was counter region

for both marine geo-strategic realm led by United States and its allies as well as continental geo-strategic realm headed by erstwhile Soviet Union and its allies. Nowadays also, the same thought which is derived from the collapse of Soviet Union, is going to settle new developments in this region which probably will be able to bring USA, Russia, China, India and Pakistan in competition and conflict to control Central Asia for their sustained military and energy security.

It followed the September 11, 2001 episode, the most important development at global level in the contemporary context in which the trade and military icons (World Trade Centre and Pentagon) of the US was attacked. In this response, the American retaliation was formed in a highly strategic fashion and Central Asian states were in the heart of logistic network in 'Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)' in Afghanistan. The United States and other NATO members had made their military presence in three of the five Central Asian states by opening of U.S. bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and the granting of more limited U.S. landing rights in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. In this 21st century first "Global War" the position or location of the Central Asian states proved to be strategically very significant for US and NATO forces in supporting OEF in Afghanistan. From 2001, the U.S. Army, Air Force and Marine Corps were supporting these operations predominantly from the 'Ganci' which was later renamed the 'Manas Transit Centre' near the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek plus Karshi-Khanabad 'K2' air base in Uzbekistan. The Manas air base became the sole facility in Central Asia for supporting U.S. operations in Afghanistan. The importance of this military base increased significantly, with high level visits between U.S. and Kyrgyz military officials. Since opened in late 2001, it has processed more than 5.3 million U.S. servicemen, or 98 per cent of all military personnel involved in the operation until June 2014.¹⁶ The Karshi-Khanabd was also a staging ground for combat, reconnaissance, and humanitarian missions in Afghanistan till 2005.

In the second phase of this global war, supplies through Pakistan to Afghanistan became vulnerable and were attacked by various anti-US groups, mainly Taliban. In 2008, 42 oil tankers were destroyed in a single attack, and later in the same year, 300 militants attacked a facility centre in Peshawar run by Port World Logistics and set on fire 96 supply trucks and six containers.¹⁷ In short the Pakistan ground line of communication (PAKGLOC) to Operation Enduring Freedom was threatened and it was a new strategic challenge for the US and its allies. The logistic supplies and connectivity of Afghan war was under threat. The war engineers had devised new strategy to supply through Northern Distribution Network (NDN) to facilitate the safe and secure logistic supplies to the NATO forces in Afghanistan.¹⁸ In this route the strategic position of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan were significant in delivering operational equipment and supplies to the NATO forces in Afghanistan. The NDN developed in 2009 - 2011, facilitated about 40 percent of Afghanistan-bound traffic, compared to 30 percent through Pakistan and in February 2012, 85 percent of the NATO's fuel supplies were transported through these routes.¹⁹ In this background the NDN's main objectives were to minimize the supplies through Pakistan because of security reasons and to deal the flow of supplies associated with these forces in Afghanistan war.

Northern Distribution Network (NDN) for Afghanistan



In this strategic competition, Central Asian states emerged an area of greater concern for major powers. The unique geopolitical position and the geo-economic potential of energy resources are the key factors behind the emergence of new great game among different major powers, in which USA, Russia, China, India and other regional powers are in process of command and control of strategic position of the region for defence and diversification of energy resources to balance their energy security demands. Evidently, these countries are high in consumption and except Russia they are low in production, thus, are dependent on import energy supplies. Therefore, in this strategic competition every major actor is intended to deter others and make stronger position to hold the Central Asian strategic location as well as oil and gas. These colliding interests may intensify the competition between great powers and subsequently, the beauty of Central Asian region is emerging in times of war / peace and in evolving strategic scenario of the world.

Geo-economic Dimensions of Hydrocarbons and Hydropower

Central Asia is a unique territory not only from the geopolitical point of view, but also from the geo-economic perspective. Its landlocked position is compensated by the possession of rich natural resources, mainly, oil, gas and hydropower. In the post-Cold War world scenario the republics are in the core of international strategy for exploitation of oil, gas and hydroelectricity and its diversification to the international market. Although the history of Central Asian oil is recorded from 13th century but being always colony of outsiders, the exploitation of these resources remained at the lowest ebb. The independence of these states in 1990s unlocked the region for international energy and open market which heightened its strategic significance on geo-economic fronts. The newly untapped oil and gas witnessed intense competition among the major players to bring the Central Asian states under their strategic influence, and control these energy resources. Russia, China, United States and India are locked in rapidly accelerating rivalry over the diversification race of oil and gas through pipelines. The diversification race is from South Stream of Russia to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan BTC and Nabucco of the West and Eastern

China-Turkmenistan-Xinjiang gas pipeline, Kazakh-China cross-border oil pipeline and South Eastern TAPI to Pakistan and India. All are in struggle to get hold in the Central Asian region to attain the objective of energy security supplies. Since oil and gas represents the primary engine of economic activity, prosperity and increasingly an important driver of the world economy, hence, Central Asian states are being considered a better energy alternative. Due to these energy resources, Central Asian region is contested by regional and trans-regional powers. It is an emerging region in international politics on strategic sphere because of rising consumption of oil and gas demands, coupled with the depletion in its production in other regions of the world. The importance of oil and gas can be also comprehended as it was one of the involving factors in both the World Wars. During the years of Cold War, oil was again an issue for US and its allies than USSR. Soviets had substantial oil resources of their own in Siberia and in the Central Asia. It became a strategic tool for political haggling in 1973-74 as oil embargo against West. Oil has also sparked the 1956 Suez crisis and 1980-88 Iran- Iraq war. Oil was again a major cause of Iraqi invasion to Kuwait in 1990. It was influential cause of conflict in Angola, Chad, Nigeria, and Aceh (Indonesia). Some believe that oil was the underlying cause of the invasion of Iraq by US in 2003. It will be used as a weapon against the enemy and remains a dominant factor in near future wars of the world. The present world is highly dependent on duo-energy resources from mobilization to communication and has decisive role in every sector of life. In terms of fuel consumption, oil ranks first as it shares 40.7 percent of the world final consumption and out of which 63.7 percent is used for transport while the rest in industry and other sectors. In case of natural gas it shares 15.2 percent of world fuel, ranking third in consumption and is used in different sectors including industry usage 43 percent and rest of other important sectors.²⁰

So far regional dimensions of energy resources of Central Asian states are concerned, the three hydrocarbon-rich states which are considered as a better and secured oil and gas alternative to Gulf for growing energy demand in the world markets, will have an important role to play in world politics. Moreover, the two energy-deficient states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are, simultaneously, water-surplus ones and have potentials for generating hydropower for export. In view of their geo-physical setting, especially physiography, these two states have added advantage of taking the benefit of their terrain facilitating natural gravitational force, in generating hydroelectricity. Hence, the region is being viewed as a source of future energy grid, in both hydrocarbons as well as hydroelectricity, making the region a centre of gravity as well as a flashpoint of rivalry.

In light of these strategically significant facts and ensuing realities, the study concludes that Central Asia's strategic position in international affairs is growing. Its strategic significance in 21st century is designed by geopolitical and geo-economic factors. These factors have strong influence in defining the destiny of war and peace. From the times of Silk Route to the Heartland concepts on to Great Game and Cold War period, the Central Asian region has remained in strategic value for the contenders. After the revival of these thoughts, the existence of Central Asian region again emerged and in post-

Cold War world it is contested by the world's major powers for strategic reasons. The world is witnessing a period of growing importance for Central Asia. It is a region where competing systems for international order are fully engaged. The strategic validity of the region is at rise as they are the members of elite world organizations, receiving sophisticated military hardware, enjoying the partnership with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO headed by US), being members of Common Security Treaty Organization (CSTO headed by Russia) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO headed by the China). In the 'Global War on Terror,' the region becomes again transit centre for OEF in Afghanistan. The region has substantial energy resources to influence and shape up the economy of largest energy consuming states of the world. Being landlocked region, there is great power rivalry giving rise to a new Great Game among Russia, China, United States, Iran, India, and Pakistan for diversification of energy resources. USA and Russia both have interests in Central Asia. The two countries are in competition over pipelines and their military bases in the region. China is very much serious in the region for security and resource access. The upcoming China's transport corridors also are an attempt towards this direction. India is looking to increase its involvement in the region under its strategy of "Going North", which in 2010 saw it begin to develop TAPI pipeline alongwith Turkmenistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. In 2010, Japan created the Central Asia plus Japan framework, a forum to facilitate dialogue between Japan and the countries of the region. In this background it is imperative for major powers to have access and influence in Central Asia for their geopolitical and geo-economic interests.

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