

THE JOURNAL OF CENTRAL ASIAN STUDIES

Volume: 31 2024 ISSN: 0975-086X



Centre of Central Asian Studies
University of Kashmir
Srinagar, J&K, India

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Volume: 31 2024 ISSN: 0975-086X

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Srinagar, J&K, India

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The Journal is peer reviewed, refereed and indexed in EBSCOhost and ProQuest. The Journal is also available online through EBSCOhost Database: Political Science Complete on web.ebscohost.com; and on the University of Kashmir web page <http://ccas.uok.edu.in>.

Scope of the Journal: The Journal welcomes original papers on all aspects of Central Asia, preferably, contemporary problems and emerging regional issues.



ISSN:0975-086X

Price: Rs. 1000 / \$ 25

Design
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Published by
Centre of Central Asian Studies
University of Kashmir
2024-25

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Geopolitical Chessboard of Central Asia

*Saurabh Dalal**

Abstract

The five Central Asian countries Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, became independent in the early 1990s, more precisely after the fall of the Soviet Union. The region is richly endowed with abundant availability of natural resources like crude oil, natural gas, cotton, gold, copper, aluminium, iron, uranium, hydropower potential, etc. which made the region of great significance and prime attention of international powers. Central Asia is also a strong market for millions of customers. India took a keen interest in the region. India's major concerns with Central Asian republics include energy, security, trade in investment infrastructure development, the fight against Islamic fundamentalism, and so on. In this paper, I want to show how Central Asia is playing a role as a geopolitical chessboard. And which players are playing a major role on the chessboard and why.

Keywords: *Central Asia, International powers, Geopolitical, Chessboard, Security.*

Introduction

Central Asia refers to a group of five states located in the middle of the Asian continent. The states are Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan (Asian Development Bank, 2010). Some people call this Central Asian region the "Heart of Asia" (Edward & Skrine, 2004). These five states were born after the collapse of the USSR in 1991. It is bounded on the south by Iran, on the north by Russia, on the east by China, and the west by the Caspian Sea. They have a total area of about 4 million square kilometers which is considerably larger than India. But their combined population is just 55 million (Roy, 2007).

Importance of Central Asia

The Central Asian countries, since their independence, have made significant economic and social development. This republic is endowed with huge hydrocarbon or natural resources. Kazakhstan the largest country in size among the five republics and with the biggest regional economy of US \$217 billion has become the largest producer of Uranium in the world. Kazakhstan is a significant exporter and possesses large reserves of gas and oil. Uzbekistan is the sixth-largest

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producer and exporter of cotton in the world. Along with substantial gold reserves, the nation also possesses hydrocarbon resources and uranium deposits. Uzbekistan's eastern neighbor Tajikistan has huge hydropower, oil deposits and precious stones in the Gorno Badakhshan region. Tajikistan's northern neighbor Kyrgyzstan is also rich in hydropower potential as well as gold deposits (Hiro, 2011). The country also has immanence tourism potential. Turkmenistan is a country that follows the policy of 'permanent neutrality' which has been also endorsed by the UN, has the world's fourth-largest natural gas reserves. Apart from the mineral resources, Central Asia is also emerging as an important economic market. Regional countries including India, China, Russia, Turkey, and Iran especially after the signing of the nuclear deal, are attracted to the region (Atlantic Council, 2021). The history of the region has been shaped by over 2000 years of conflict, as powerful empires vied for control over the trade route linking Europe and Asia, known as the Silk Route. In the 19th century, the states of Central Asia were seen as crucial according to the 'Heartland Theory', which was introduced by Halford Mackinder in 1904 in his work 'Geographical Pivot of History'. This theory was later reinterpreted by Nichols Spykman in 1944 as the 'Rimland Theory'. According to this revised theory, controlling the heartland and the seas surrounding the Eurasian landmass are equally vital in order to establish global dominance. Central Asia is thus viewed as a pivotal strategic area in this theory (Nourzhanov, 2006).

Geo politically Central Asia has been described as one of the world's most strategic zones, located between Russia, China, and a troubled Middle east (Ram, 1982). Due to the Geopolitical and Geo strategic importance of this region, many small and big countries of the world are competing for power over this region. Usually, it has been called the 'New Great Game'. Russia, China, the US, India, Pakistan, Turkey, the European Union, and non-governmental organizations are playing a major role in this game. The power struggle between the British Raj and USSR in 19th century Afghanistan, which we know as the 'Great Game'. The term 'Great Game' was first used by Arthur Conally (Kaushiki, 2013).

Game of Great Powers

The Great Power here refers to the US, Russia, and China and the game refer to the reasons behind the interest in the region. Although geographically far from the US Central Asia, they have been able to establish a strong economic trade relationship with the region. In addition to natural resources, the US is fortifying its ties with Central Asia to confront China and Russia. From drug trafficking to Islamic fanaticism and different terrorist actions, the US is well aware of it all. The central Asian strategy of the United States emphasizes economic growth, human

rights protection, stability, sovereignty, and regional integration. The United States aims to increase trade and investment opportunities between Central Asia and the United States, focusing on business diversification and improving supply chain sustainability. These goals are consistent with US policy to support the development of democratic political institutions, the rule of law, and human rights in the region, and are set within the broader goal of promoting mutually beneficial diplomatic engagement (Brzezinski, 1997). The goal of the United States' efforts in Central Asia is to foster an atmosphere that allows for shared economic progress and prosperity by ensuring that the region's nations uphold their sovereignty and exercise independent judgment in international affairs. Furthermore, border security, counterterrorism, labour rights protection, intellectual property rights protection, and the advancement of women's economic empowerment are the main focuses of US initiatives in Central Asia (Oliker & Shlapak, 2005).

On the other hand, bilateral relations between Russia and Central Asia in the post-Soviet years received more attention than in the past. The fundamental objectives of Russia have been to prevent the spread of terrorism, stop drug trafficking, and gain access to the mineral wealth of these nations (Badan, 2001). Russia has a number of important interests in Central Asia that reflect its historical ties, geopolitical ambitions, security concerns, and economic priorities. Central Asia forms an important part of Russia's strategic outlook and plays a key role in its foreign policy approach. Russia has historically maintained deep cultural, historical, and demographic ties with Central Asia. These long ties affect Russia's social and cultural interests in the region, as well as efforts to ensure the rights and well-being of the ethnic Russian population in certain Central Asian countries. Central Asia is still strategically important to Russia's larger objectives. Russia's national identity is strongly associated with this region, and the country's ability to sustain influence in Central Asia is crucial to its status as a major world power. Furthermore, Russia, which prioritizes rebuffing Western aggression and preserving its influence in the former Soviet Union, sees Central Asia as a part of its historical sphere of influence. From a security perspective, Russia is concerned with stability and prevention of security threats from terrorism, extremism, and illegal drug trafficking in Central Asia. Because instability could spill over into Russian territory, the region is central to Russia's national security interests. Russia has actively cooperated with Central Asian countries on security issues, including border security, counter-terrorism and joint military exercises to strengthen regional stability. Economically, Central Asia serves as a market area for Russian products and a source of natural resources, especially in the energy sector. Russia has a strong interest in gaining access to the energy resources available in the region, such as natural gas and oil. In addition, Central Asia is an important transit

route for Russian energy exports to the world market. Russian companies have participated in various economic projects, especially infrastructure and energy projects, which aim to strengthen economic and trade cooperation. Russia's investment in preserving and promoting the Russian language in Central Asia underscores its goal of preserving cultural ties and promoting interpersonal communication. The diverse cultural heritage of Central Asia continues to be important to Russian cultural diplomacy efforts in the region (Oliphant, 2013).

And China is being able to reach out to smaller Central Asian countries through its chequebook diplomacy and by using its economic power. The protection of the Xinjiang provinces and the desire to rule over the Asian continent is one of the reasons for establishing relations with them. China's interests in Central Asia are multifaceted and part of its global strategic vision. China in particular wants to increase its economic presence in the region. Central Asia is rich in natural resources such as hydrocarbons, making it crucial for China's energy security. China is making significant investments in the region's infrastructure development as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including energy projects and transport networks, to promote access to energy resources and regional connectivity. Through these programs, China hopes to further incorporate Central Asia into its larger economic agenda while also opening up new trade channels and markets. Second, China gives Central Asian security a high priority. China seeks to uphold regional stability and counteract cross-border security concerns, considering the region to be a crucial hub in the battle against terrorism and extremism. China's security depends on these initiatives, particularly in the Xinjiang area, which shares borders with much Central Asian nations. In addition; China is cooperating with Central Asia to strengthen its geopolitical influence. By developing economic and diplomatic relations, China aims to establish itself as a key partner in the region, reducing the historical dominance of Russia and seeking to create a favorable alternative to the liberal order led by the United States. Furthermore, China's geopolitical objective of extending power and influence globally is furthered by its commitment to Central Asia. China is concentrating on enhancing energy cooperation and fostering cultural interactions with Central Asian nations in addition to its economic and security concerns. This covers financial support for eco-friendly energy initiatives like solar and hydropower as well as collaboration in the fields of education and culture to advance interpersonal relationships. Finally, China can solve domestic issues like overcapacity manufacturing and the need for new markets and investment opportunities for Chinese enterprises by looking to Central Asia. China may diversify its trade channels, lessen its reliance on certain transit hubs, and foster economic growth by strengthening its ties with Central Asia (Melnikovova, 2020).

Role of Pakistan Government in Chessboard

Pakistan's interests in Central Asia are multifaceted, reflecting strategic, economic, geo-economic, security, and geopolitical considerations. The region plays an important role in Pakistan's foreign policy and helps shape its broader regional and global engagement. Economically Pakistan wants to strengthen its relations with Central Asia to create a trade and energy partnership. It is a key source for Pakistan's energy demands given the region's abundant energy resources. This has given Pakistan the confidence to start cooperative businesses and energy projects with nations in Central Asia that will boost Pakistan's energy security while also yielding economic advantages. Pakistan's efforts towards regional connection and integration are heavily dependent on Central Asia from a strategic standpoint. As it works to establish commercial and transport connections that can support regional economic integration, Pakistan views the area as crucial. This fits with its larger plan to lessen reliance on seaports and increase the connection between nations, especially by working with Central Asian nations on a range of infrastructure and trade development initiatives. Pakistan's geo-economics priorities include lowering reliance on foreign loans and forging economic ties with Central Asia. In terms of geo-economics, Pakistan is concentrating on building economic ties with Central Asia and lowering reliance on aid and loans from outside. Improved commercial relations with Central Asian nations can help Pakistan become more of an economic player and partner in the area while progressively reducing reliance on foreign aid. This is a sign of a change towards strengthening self-sufficiency and using economic cooperation as a means to achieve foreign policy goals. Geopolitically, Central Asia offers opportunities for Pakistan to diversify its regional partnerships, balance regional relations, and adopt a more multidimensional foreign policy approach. Pakistan hopes to enhance diplomatic ties, broaden its regional area of influence, and advance a nuanced understanding of foreign policy processes by forging strong political and diplomatic ties with Central Asian nations. Furthermore, Pakistan's interests in Central Asia are inextricably linked to security cooperation. The region provides a platform for joint efforts to address security challenges such as counter-terrorism, border control, and regional stability. Pakistan considers this cooperation essential to strengthen its regional security strategies and counter common security threats. Culturally Pakistan aims to strengthen people-to-people relations through educational and cultural exchanges with Central Asia. This involves working together on projects related to education, the arts, and tourism to foster understanding and collaboration across cultural and human development domains. Pakistan aims to strengthen its historical and cultural connections with Central Asia by encouraging these contacts (Amin, 1994).

Afghan Factor

Apart from Russia, China, and the US, Afghanistan is an important player in this 'New Great Game' Because Afghanistan and Central Asia share a common history and has significant ethnic cultural and linguistic links. Three of the five Central Asian states share a common border. The main point here is the security issue. Afghanistan is a country from which all terrorist activities end and drug trafficking begins. Behind all these activities a the support of Pakistan Afghanistan is now part of the Taliban regime, which has raised questions about the security of all states, including India Therefore, everyone agrees that the Taliban has emerged as an important factor in establishing relations with Central Asia, with the security of each country at the forefront (Magnus & Naby, 1995).

India's Role

Central Asia is a geo-politically geo-economically geo-strategically important region for India. Although this region is important to India, India has not been able to establish relations with Central Asia as the major powers have been doing due to connectivity issues. India is an emerging power, and due to the future energy deficit and unstable political situation in West Asia, India had to carry its identity in Central Asia. However, India could not do it properly, which is a negative aspect of India's national interest. While China has played an active role since the beginning with five newly independent Central Asian states, India has lagged far behind. Central Asian states strengthen their economy by exporting their natural resources like oil, gas, mineral resources, etc. But since they are landlocked countries, their transportation space is very limited. However, the few pathways available for this transport are controlled by external forces. Trade routes in the region are controlled by Russia to the north, China to the east, America, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey to the west, and Iran to the south. India could not exploit any of these trade routes to its advantage. Although India has been given access to Central Asia by Iran in the south, the current Iran-US conflict poses a problem for India. India is not able to trade with this region due to various reasons despite having trade advantages. India's central Asia trade is hardly near \$750 million, comparatively much lower than China's \$46 billion in 2012 (Menon & Rajiv, 2019).

Central Asia is a region with which Afghanistan has direct border contact. As a result, the frown on terrorism is another feature of the region. This terrorism poses a question mark to the security of the entire region as well as India. So the Indian government wants to take a hard approach to strengthen ties with the region. India's domestic energy demand is increasing day by day. As a result, Central Asia became an important region for India. India's neighbor China has built road rail

pipelines across Central Asia. Through these routes, China, Siberian wood, Mongolian iron ore, Kazakhstan oil, Turkmenistan gas, etc. are easily supplied to their own country. At the same time, China and Russia are making friends with each other and are showing their existence in Central Asia by taking various steps. On the other hand, India's Chabahar Port and International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) projects are far behind. In this scenario, India launched the India "Connect Central Asia Policy" to address its energy deficit, compete with major powers, and utilize the SCO platform. The policy aimed to increase India's level of engagement with Central Asia, both bilaterally and multilaterally, which has been limited in the last two decades (Charan, 2015). At present, India has chosen Central Asia as an alternative to West Asia, keeping in mind the future, in addition to the energy sector, other issues that have become important to India in its relations with Central Asia are the TAPI gas pipeline, INSTC agreement, Ashgabat Agreement, Counter China policy, Security issue, and the larger market (Bhattacharya, 2022).

Iranian Factor

Through geopolitical, cultural, economic, and strategic endeavors, the Iranian government shapes its interaction with Central Asia, playing a significant influence in the region. The Iranian government's varied participation in Central Asia is indicative of its attempts to forge alliances, bolster its power in the region, and foster mutual collaboration. Iran sees Central Asia as a significant trading, investment, and cooperative partner in the economy. The Iranian government aims to strengthen economic ties with Central Asian countries, recognizing the potential of the region as a profitable market for Iranian goods, and an essential source of energy. Iran's commitment to economic initiatives and infrastructure projects in Central Asia underlines its commitment to promoting economic cooperation, trade, and investment, contributing to the economic development of the region. Iran strategically aims to expand its regional influence and geopolitical position in Central Asia. The Iranian government's role in the region is central to its efforts to promote regional stability, security cooperation, and border control measures. By cooperating with Central Asian countries on security issues, Iran emphasizes its commitment to strengthening regional security, countering security threats, and promoting stability in the wider region. Iran places a great emphasis on its historical and cultural connections to Central Asia and works hard to foster cross-cultural dialogue and people-to-people relationships. In an effort to strengthen historical and cultural ties with Central Asian nations, the Iranian government is focusing its efforts on collaboration in education and culture. Iran's strategic focus on cultural diplomacy highlights its attempts to foster mutual understanding, foster goodwill, and advance cultural reconciliation with Central Asia. Geopolitically, the

Iranian government is a major influence on Central Asia's foreign policy strategy. Iran needs the region to further its geopolitical goals, balance the dynamics of the world, and diversify its strategic partnerships. Iran's dedication to Central Asia is indicative of its endeavors to maintain a multifaceted and equitable foreign policy, shaped by its strategic positioning and geopolitical objectives (Lal, 2006).

Trump Card of Turkey

Turkey highlights unique cultural connections with Central Asia, particularly focusing on the historical, linguistic, and ethnic bonds that stem from their shared Turkic ancestry. The country values the shared Turkic heritage with Central Asian nations, fostering a unified identity and historical legacy. This heritage encompasses linguistic resemblances, cultural customs, and historical narratives unique to Turkic peoples, which underpin cultural relationships. The diffusion of Turkish culture in Central Asia underscores the importance of the Turkish language and literature, given the linguistic relatedness between Turkish and numerous Central Asian dialects. Initiatives in language education, scholarly exchanges, and literary collaborations are designed to enhance cultural bonds and improve dialogue between Turkish and Central Asian communities. Turkey underscores the historical and traditional aspects shared with Central Asia. Common historical figures, legendary tales, and folklore lay the groundwork for cultural dialogue and mutual respect for a collective heritage, enhancing cultural unity (Republic of Türkiye, n.d.). They also emphasize educational and academic cooperation by facilitating the exchange of students, researchers and experts between Turkey and Central Asian countries. This cooperation promotes a deeper understanding of common cultural values, historical experiences and academic achievements, and promotes cultural ties between the two regions. Turkey promotes people-to-people connections through cultural exchange, art, music, and tourism. These efforts aim to create opportunities for the people of Turkey and Central Asia to participate in cultural activities, build personal connections, and increase mutual understanding. In general, Turkey's cultural ties with Central Asia focus on the common Turkish heritage, including language, literature, historical traditions, educational exchange, and people-to-people relations. These cultural ties are the basis for strengthening ties between Turkey and Central Asian countries (Osipova, 2023).

Conclusion

Central Asia is a geopolitical chessboard; the geopolitical chessboard of Central Asia represents a complex landscape shaped by intersecting interests, strategic maneuvering, and historical legacies that have far-reaching implications

for the region and beyond, where various big and small players continue to play strategic roles. Just as Pakistan and Iran are using the Islamic card, Turkey is using its culture and history of ethnic relations. On the other hand, despite the connectivity problem, India is using its history and soft power to establish relations between the two regions, India, like China, Russia, and the US, is not far behind in this economic and security competition. Iran is also an important factor in establishing relations with Central Asia. Because Iran is a country through which India can enter Central Asia through the port of Chabahar. However, tensions between Iran and the US and the Taliban issue in Afghanistan have caused considerable concern in India. Central Asia's geopolitical chessboard is also characterized by a delicate balance of power, where countries navigate complex alliances, rivalries, and strategic partnerships to safeguard their interests and maintain regional stability. The involvement of regional organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Economic Cooperation Organization, reflects the collaborative efforts to address shared challenges, promote economic cooperation, and enhance security arrangements in the region. The evolving dynamics of the geopolitical chessboard in Central Asia present both opportunities and challenges for the countries involved. As the region increasingly becomes a theater for geopolitical competition, cooperation, and conflict, Central Asian states are compelled to navigate the complexities of great power politics while safeguarding their sovereignty, economic development, and cultural heritage. The convergence of interests and divergent agendas in Central Asia underscores the need for a nuanced and strategic approach to addressing the region's geopolitical complexities. It is difficult to give a definite answer as to whether Central Asia is not using its hidden power or will not in the future, just as the big powers are using Central Asia for their own benefit. The board of this game is Central Asia. Central Asia is as important to other major powers as its geopolitical and geo-strategic location, just as its board plays an important role in the game of chess. As a result, they are becoming economically stronger day by day. Again, it would not be wrong to assume that Central Asia will emerge in the future as a strong regional organization like ASEAN.

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