



Russia in the Central Asian Geopolitical Cobweb: Challenges and Options for India

Mudasir Mubarik and Parvaiz Ahmad Thoker

School of Global Relations, Central University of Punjab, Bathinda, 151001, India
mmubarik88@gmail.com

Available online at: www.isca.in, www.isca.me

Received 21st March 2016, revised 15th April 2016, accepted 13th May 2016

Abstract

The Soviet implosion witnessed Central Asia in the backwater of Russian foreign policy. However, changing circumstances in the region impelled Russia to re-energise its relationship with the resource-rich and strategically vital Central Asia. Control over energy resources of the former Soviet Union republics, export routes of natural resources in Central Asia became one of the central issues in post-Cold War politics. In this dynamic milieu, the region remains critical to Putin's intention of establishing Russia as the leading player in the Heartland (Central Asia) by minimizing the developments of foreign presence, protecting strategically significant Southern Periphery. Therefore, Kremlin is keen to ensure a primary right of influence over the affairs of the Central Asian republics. Nevertheless, there are numerous obstacles in the way of such ambitions-the war in Afghanistan becomes a mopping-up operation. In this context Russia in collaboration with China is trying their best to secure dominant influence over their backyards, a region rich in oil and gas reserves. China is strengthening its commercial primacy seeking to maintain peace in its neighborhood. In this context, this paper is an attempt to understand Russia's strategic position Vis-a- Vis, major powers and regional actors. The subsequent part of the paper will examine how India is trying to strengthen its relationship with Central Asian republics both at bilateral as well as multilateral formats. Furthermore, the paper will also discuss Russia's converging and diverging interests in its foreign policy towards Indian presence in Central Asia. The last part of the paper will highlight India's Challenges ahead and policy options to meet its strategic interests in the Central Asia.

Keywords: Geo-strategy, Near Abroad, Pro-Active Approach, Southern periphery Russian Dominance.

Introduction

In the modern and contemporary history, Central Asia got entangled in the geopolitical games. After the Crimean War defeat, Russian Tsar Alexander II shifted its policy towards the Central Asian states for geographical expansion. Tsarist Russia, then the Soviet Union thus, established its control towards Central Asia for more than hundred years. Therefore, the Central Asian states remained under the control of Soviet-Union and later on by Russian dominance¹. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a strategic power vacuum in the region². The vacuum of influence and the unexploited mineral resources have heightened major and regional player's pivot to Central Asia. Having become the core interests of rival powers which have been using the opportunities for action in Central Asia to assert themselves, settle scores, and advance their own interests. On the other hand, Central Asia reconfigured its relationship with the West in order to ward off its economic crisis and bring about a smooth transformation from controlled economy to a market one. As a result, Central Asia has remained off the radar of the Moscow's foreign policy (Uwehalbak and Heinrich Tiller, 1994) during the early 1990's. With the end of the then Russian president Boris Yeltsin's dormant attitude and the reemergence of a more assertive Russia under President Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin, began reorienting its foreign policy to reclaim its strategic

backyard, near abroad and an integral part of the zone of Russia's special interests³. In order to gain strategic leverage in its near abroad, Putin developed the regional organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), to advance its lost influence in Central Asia. Central Asia is the vital pillar of its Eurasian strategy and constitutes a strategic space that protects its territorial borders. So, the Central Asian countries remained an iron curtain for geostrategic interests of Russia.

After 9/11 attack, US decided to shift its focus to CAR's in order to marginalize Russia and China in the region and expand its own strategic hold in the region. Even, the Central Asian leaders gave verbal support to the US-led war on terrorism. Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic went further by providing airbases available to the US military. The presence of NATO forces in Afghanistan, which serves as a gate between South Asia and Central Asia. These developments upped the international perceptions of Central Asia's strategic significance. Most of the Central Asian countries presently look to Afghanistan's possible developments in the eventuality of US exit from Afghanistan. Therefore, each country has its own strategic interests in the region especially for Russia, China, and India in Chechnya, Xinjiang and Kashmir respectively.

China, too, tried to enhance its strategic presence in Central Asian. China has expanded its footprint in Central Asia through soft power particularly in trade, energy agreements, transport infrastructure, roads and rail connectivity and the gradual enlargement of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to include both security and economics. China has built a 988 kilometers long pipeline from Astana to Xinjiang designed to carry out about ten million tons of oil annually. Besides, China is constructing eighteen hundred (1800) kilometer pipeline that connects four Central Asian countries and will transport about forty (40) billion cubic meters of gas annually after its completion⁴. Under the aegis of the SCO, China has provided nine hundred million worth of loans to Central Asian republics. The Chinese leadership is committed to cooperate with its ideologically committed friend Russia to enhance its strategic leverage in Central Asia. The main stimulus for Sino-Russian cooperation continues to be the common objective to contain United States influence, which cannot accomplish in separation. So, there is reciprocity of requirements for both the countries to contain West in the region⁵. Nevertheless, Chinese scholars view Russia's Eurasian Economic Community and CSTO as direct entrants of SCO⁶. Despite, the major global powers competition in Central Asia, Russia still maintained its exclusive influence on the Central Asian energy resources, deploying its military troops for security reasons, trying to check extremism, strengthening different pro-Russia regional blocs in various multilateral formats. Russia is determined to remain the dominant power in Eurasia in general and Central Asia in particular. Although, Moscow's influence in the Central Asian region is waning especially in the economic sphere and is facing new challenges. Yet, for the foreseeable future, it will remain a key partner of Central Asian countries.

In this geostrategic competition, India remained a latecomer. Due to its internal crisis such as economic difficulties, security challenges and unstable political milieu prevented it from taking major initiatives in the Central Asian republics. Notwithstanding this, India recognized Central Asia as an area of strategic significance. The growth of the Indian economy creates an ever-growing demand for energy and natural resources to enhance and maintain the intensity of growth. With the intense power play taking place between major powers and regional actors in the strategic arena of Central Asia, India's emphasis on soft power strikes a positive chord among these countries. However, India's absence from the SCO and CSTO were the main reasons as to why India could not promptly make a place for itself as other countries did. India didn't gain any strategic leverage and fear the losing out in the New Great Game was predominant in the political and diplomatic circles. Therefore, in order to gain the strategic leverage a connect central Asia policy was unveiled by the minister of external affairs (E. Rashid Ahmad) in a keynote address at the first meeting of the India- Central Asia Dialogue, organized on 12-13 June 2012 in Kyrgyzstan. The meeting aims to review India's dormant relations with the five central Asian countries. Thus, the real challenge that emerges for India is to find ways and means to enhance its presence in the region. India concluded policies and programs with the

Central Asia. On the other hand, India and Russia are trying to refresh their all-weather friendship which will remain an opportunity for India to access Central Asian region. Russia designs to become more integrated with Asia will possibly lead to a stronger Indo-Russian relationship including China. The feasibility of Russia making a full orientation toward Central Asian republics came under doubt even before the West imposed economic sanctions in response to the Ukraine crisis and subsequently the annexation of Crimea. Nevertheless, the Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to bridge gaps with Asia's rising powers, both at bilateral and multilateral fore's.

Geo-Strategic and Geo-Political Salience of Central Asia

Central Asia is the largest landlocked region and is regarded as the heart of Asia. The region stretches from the Caspian Sea in the West to the China in the East, from Afghanistan in the South to the Russia in the North. The emergence of new states not only left indelible imprints on the geopolitical milieu but the geo-economic and geostrategic situation also affected. The names of all the five Central Asian Republics ending with the Persian suffix *tan* means, *land* and in the modern period the five republics, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan cover the definition of Central Asia (Micheal, 2013)⁷. The following political map of Central Asia indicates the five countries in different colors.

The vast deposits of gas, Copper and Uranium make this area an attractive region for energy hunger Europe and China and its geostrategic location in the very Centre of the Eurasian continent on the intersection of critical transport routes. Halford Mackinder in his work, *The Geographical Pivot of History* considered Central Asia as a pivot or heartland due to the nineteenth-century struggle between Britain and Russia over this territory what is referred to as The Great Game or Tournament of Shadows (Khan, 2013)⁸. He summarized his Heartland Theory in a later work: "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island controls the world"⁹. Zbigniew Brzezinski suggested a post-modern version of the Mackinder geopolitical doctrine. He argued that "whoever controls this space, will dominate the world"¹⁰. Another geo-strategist Yelena Nikolayevna Zabortseva in her article titled, "*Forgotten region*" to the "*Great Game*" region: *On the development of geopolitics in Central Asia*, highlighted that international community has increased its focus towards the resource-rich region (Central Asian). She highlights that resources and advantageous position have created new realities in the region. According to her, "Central Asia had remained a buffer zone between great powers. However, Russia maintains a dominating relationship with the countries of the region"¹¹. The consideration of these theories further highlights the strategic importance of the region. Spykman referred Central Asia as 'power politics'. Therefore, in the above context, the major powers tried to frame their policies to enhance their hold in the region¹². The regional powers such as India, Pakistan, Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan are also making efforts to create a position of influence in this region.



Source: <http://www.mapsofindia.com/maps-of-asia/central-asia-political-map.html>

Figure-1
Central Asia Political Map

Russia's Legacy in Central Asia

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia had no clear Central Asia policy. Both were experiencing different kinds of structural transformations, including economic and political reforms. Alexander Solzhenitsyn (Russian scholar) wrote in 1991 that the Central Asian Republics are a liability for Russia, and Russia should leave the Central Asian region in order to escape from their burden and fragile circumstances which Moscow then faced. Thus, the internal dynamics and a general withdrawal from the former Soviet Union led to the decline in Moscow's economic, military and political relations with the Central Asian republics. However, the second half of the 1990's marked a shift in the Russian foreign policy approach. It was based on the precepts of the 'Primakov doctrine' to regain Russia's strategic influence in the region. Later on, the Russian President Putin embarked on the process of internal balancing to regaining a hold on Central Asia. Besides, joining the SCO, the Russian President Vladimir Putin developed Moscow's security structures such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Collective Rapid Reaction Force exercises are carried out by Russia to safeguard the boundaries of the Central Asian countries. Russia and Uzbekistan signed a security agreement namely 'Treaty of Allied Relations' in 2005. One of the provisions of this agreement calls for, military assistance in case of aggression by a third state. An important provision was that an aggression against one state is considered an aggression to all the parties of the agreement¹³. Besides, under this agreement, it was also agreed to utilize of each other's military bases and installations whenever required. Similarly, Kazakhstan is Russia's key strategic ally in the Central Asian region¹⁴. Moscow considers Astana as a regional powerhouse and key country by means of which Russia can launch its influence in the all Central Asian countries.

The then, President Dmitri Medvedev, reclaimed Russia's former influence over the CIS states and reasserted Central Asia a zone of privileged interests that once remained under its control since the mid of nineteenth Century. Presently, Moscow is pushing for closer military and economic, cultural ties with the Central Asian countries to strengthen its strategic leverage. Militarily, Russia has also made a significant presence in the region predominantly to control security challenge like transnational crime, illegal migration, small arms proliferation, drug trafficking, terrorism etc. to its territory from the region. In fact, Russia is more close to Central Asian republics than other players as all of them were part of former USSR and in turn, Central Asian countries are also closely linked with Russia for military, technical, and economic assistance.

Similarly, in the economic sphere, Russia is well positioned to remain the leading player in Central Asia for years to come. Russia has initiated a number of economic institutions in order to pursue its various economic interests in the region such as Customs Union (CU), the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), Eurasian Development Bank (EDB), Anti-Crisis Fund, Common Wealth of Independent States Free Trade Zone (CISFTZ). Likewise, in the energy sector Russia plays a leading role in Central Asia, the major share of the oil and gas pipelines from Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan is directed towards Russia. It is estimated that about eighty-five percent of Kazakh oil export pass through Russian territory. However, a large share of oil passes through the non-state owned Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) directly to the consumers¹⁵. Gazprom a Russian company sells mostly Central Asian gas to European countries and using Moscow gas for domestic consumption. It also made plans to build new pipelines from Turkmenistan to Kazakhstan to Russia along the Caspian coast,

but there might be a serious rivalry on this project¹⁶. Russia is expecting to increase its gas imports from Central Asia up to 2020. Thus, from the above head, it became obvious that Russia has vested interests in Central Asia which include geopolitical, geostrategic and geo-economic¹⁷. In order to protect these interests, a paradigm shift in Russian foreign policy *vis-à-vis* Central Asia has been witnessed during the last one decade.

Emerging Geopolitics in Central Asia: Role of Russia

Since the eighteenth century onward, Central Asia has been caught by the major powers for their respective strategic interests. The region had become a bone of contention because of its overall significance. As a result, the region remained an area of cooperation and competition for national interests of states engaged in the region. In this context Arthur Conolly, coined the term 'The Great Game' in the 1830's. Later on, Rudyard Kipling immortalized the concept in his novel entitled *Kim*, 1901¹⁸. From 1813 to 1907 Great Britain and Tsarist Russia were engaged in competition for domination of Central Asia region. This competition is termed as the Great Game or the Tournament of Shadows. It was a sort of contest to gain national interests between the Tsarist Russia and British Empires in Central Asia in the nineteenth century.

Central Asian region remain geostrategically a significant region endowed with rich natural and energy resources like oil, hydrocarbons and natural gas. Apart from this, the 9/11 attacks have enhanced the importance of the region as a major area of international interest and involvement. Russia, USA, China, Iran, Turkey as well as Europe, India and Pakistan also became important players in the region in accordance with geo-political interest's and security strategies of their respective countries. Thus, the region has turned a new geopolitical and geostrategic entity and became the target of global powers competing for domination and control. Lutz Kleveman writes that the New Great Game "rages in the region." While as Bill Richardson, the former Secretary of Energy and US ambassador to the United Nations, held that the US involvement in Central Asia is not only to defeat militant outfits like al Qaeda but also to "diversify its sources of oil and gas and to prevent strategic inroads by those who don't share its values". So, in this context Central Asian region became a ground for competition for major and regional players to gain their respective national interests¹⁹. The United States wants to maintain peace and stability and to prevent government failures due to rise in Islamic fundamentalism, radicalism and extremism. For the successful execution of War on Global Terror in Afghanistan Central Asian States provided an optimistic and supportive foreign policy to eradicate the terrorism in Afghanistan. The countries of the region have provided land and air routes to the United Nations security forces for supplies to Afghanistan (Northern Distributive Alliance). These routes were also used to withdraw forces from Afghanistan. Apart from this, the United States wants to prevent the emergence of regional empires, such as the rebirth of the Russian empire and the potential rise China in

Central Asia. Above all the United States major geopolitical interests in Central Asia is to promote its economic interests and to inculcate democracy, respect for human rights and good governance in the region.

In the case of China which claims her ties with Central Asia for centuries, but Soviet control over the region during the 19th and 20th centuries largely gave a rude setback to these contacts. However, the demise of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic's (USSR) in 1990's provided China a chance to enhance its footprints in the Central Asian region. China is emphasis on two important objectives such as assisting the economic development of the republics and providing a conducive environment for economic development, political taming and stabilization of China's problematic Xinjiang region²⁰. Chinese security goals are to counter separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism in Central Asia. China fears that these three evil forces could affect adversely Chinese internal and external security. In order to compete and maintain its strategic space, China had made efforts to construct roads, improve infrastructure and railways in Central Asia. Therefore, China is investing tremendously and has broken the Russia's monopoly over Central Asia in supplies, marketing, transport routes etc. China has been working to construct new Silk Road to integrate Central Asia and the rest of the world with Xinjiang, an autonomous region in northwest China for security and economic interests. The following map shows the new Silk Road.

The United States and China are expanding their footprints in the Central Asia region. Expansions of these powers footprints are serious challenges to Russian monopoly in the region. Against this background, the growing competition in the region compelled Russia to safeguard her strategic concerns and territorial borders in its southern periphery. The major interests of Russia in Central Asia are to check the expanding footprints of the major powers such as US and China. With the onset of the New Great Game, Russia is again making a lot of efforts to limit the influence of the US and China that had made endeavors in Central Asia. Central Asia is prioritized in its foreign policy. Economic and military aids to Central Asia have been increased manifold. Strategic facilities of the US to Central Asia have been denied on the insistence of Russia. Similarly, whatever little strategic standing of India in Central Asia, it has also been asked to wind up. Russia signed Collective Security agreement with Central Asian Republics in Tashkent in 1992 in order to bring Central Asia under its security umbrella. In 1996 Shanghai, five was established by Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Later on, it was renamed as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The regional organization was formed to strengthen political, economic and military engagements with Central Asian republics. The global economic crisis, Eurozone crisis and the decline of American pre-eminence, give Russia a strong hand in the region. Russia established the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015 as per the Declaration on Eurasian Integration signed by Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus on 18 November 2011.



Source: <https://www.google.co.in/search?q=new+silk+road+china+wants+in+central+asia,+ma>

Figure-2
Central Asia

Therefore, this union may pose a challenge to the West and even China. This declaration is the roadmap of integration process towards the formation of Eurasian Union to boost economic, military and regional integration in post-Soviet space. Thus, such currents and cross currents of major powers have been defined by Peter Hopkirk as 'beginning of the New Great Game' Zbigniew Brzezinski called it the emergence of a 'Grand Chessboard'. Therefore, from different perspectives, it is obvious that Russia has dominant control in the Central Asian region whether it is in the economic sense, political and militarily. Russia enjoyed the influential control in the gas pipelines, about forty percent of the Russian ethnic population resides in Central Asia and culturally both Russia and Central Asia had historical bonds.

India's Interests in the Central Asia

India and Central Asia have been sharing common civilizational bonds since the recorded history. With the onset of the Old Great Game, bilateral relationship between both the regions had become enervated. But with the end of the Cold War and consequently the collapse of Soviet Union, some internal and external dynamics brought both the region closer to each other on account of some mutual interests. Central Asia because of its strategic location and having mineral wealth such as oil, gas, hydroelectric power, gold and aluminum deposits etc. In this context, a mutual and positive cooperation between India and Central Asian states is possible. Central Asia can also gain from

India in many areas such as automobiles, hotel industry, electronics, textile, drugs, pharmaceuticals, banking, and insurance. India has also the potential to offer to train to Central Asian students, journalists, diplomats, armed forces etc. Therefore, a kind of a dependency may exist, if both the regions cooperate in the above-mentioned areas. In this connection, India is having numerous interests in the Central Asian region. Geostrategically, India own greater interests in Central Asia to balance the growing Chinese influence and stabilizing the turbulent Afghanistan. The possible ISAF withdrawal from Afghanistan has sent warning signals to all its neighbors both to Central Asia as well as in South Asia²¹. India's presence in Central Asia is massive for convergence of interests such as dealing with global economic changes, multi-polar world order, to tackle ethnic and cultural diversity and the menace of radical fundamentalism, to stop trans-border terrorism etc. Hence, the geostrategic importance of Central Asia entails India to have an excellent bilateral relationship that could benefit them in several ways²². Central Asia lies at a strategic location between two nuclear powers such as Russia and china. This region shares borders with Afghanistan, a turbulent country became the hub of militant outfits. So, any advancement and expansion of militant groups could stimulate similar elements active in India. Therefore, for India the geostrategic importance of Central Asia Republics is immense. Under no circumstance, India cannot ignore the geostrategic significance of the region. Similarly, the vital resource-rich region in the contemporary times has become an area of immense importance to Europe, US, China, and Iran.

The US is trying to contain Russia, China and Iran and increase its own strategic engagements with Central Asian countries. On the other hand, China has invested billions of dollars for the development of Central Asian oilfields to fulfill its immediate and long-term energy demands. Similarly, West wants to extend its influence by adopting dynamic means such as NATO eastwards expansion, the Partnership for Peace (PFP) program is also a means to increase strategic leverage. As a result, such moves and counter moves are likely to bring power politics arrangements among different countries in Central Asia region. This obviously led to implications for India's interests in the region. Therefore, India must consider these developments for its own interests²³ otherwise it may pose negative consequences and so a big challenge for India. Central Asia is being rich in energy and a big market, geo-economically; it is pivotal place in Indian economic policy. The future vision for cooperation between India and Central Asian countries in the field of energy seems significant. Recently India's interest and prominence in the Central Asian region are one of the main driving forces for India's involvement in the region. Since trade and economic relations between India and Central Asian Republics remains a low and unsatisfactory aspect of the relationship. However, there are tremendous potentialities of a beneficial relationship. The ground situation depicts a low level of trade relationship, inadequate number of joint ventures and no investments projects in Central Asian countries by India. There are numerous reasons for this negligence Indian engagements in the region such non-availability of hard currency, difficulties in currency conversion facility services and communication links whether road and rail connectivity. To connect with the region at present it is only through air links which are problematic and costly. However, the potential for shared economic advantages for India and CAR's is vast. The strategically important Central Asian region is a gigantic consumer market, hungry for a range of goods and services which the region is unable to produce and manufacture at home. Therefore, in this respect, India can be the best option as both are linked through recorded history. India and Central Asia have economic complementarity in terms of natural resources, manpower, and consumer markets. For India, the economic ties can be materialized through joint ventures in different sectors like banking, insurance, agriculture, information technology, and pharmaceutical. Although, certain commodities such as tea, drugs, pharmaceuticals and chemicals have established a grip on the Central Asian markets²⁴. But there are numerous ways and means to boost economic cooperation.

Indo-Russian Relations: Changing Paradigm

Bilateral relations between the erstwhile Soviet Union and India were established on 17 April 1947. The relations between the two nations have been based on friendship, mutual trust, and cooperation. Cold War Indo-Soviet relationship was shaped by Indian needs, Soviet opportunism, and American ambivalence. The time-tested friendship reached its apex during the 1970's when the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace and Friendship was

signed. India's nuclear test in 1974 was to some extent welcomed by the Soviet Union as against this Soviet approach, India was imposed sanctions by the US, Japan, and other major powers. Besides, the strategic relationship, India was in a position in which 70 percent of army armaments, 80 percent of their force and 85 percent of naval arms were soviet produced were in the Indian stock²⁵. However, this strategic relationship declined after the end of the Cold War power politics and the subsequent demise of the Soviet-Union. Russia tilted towards the west for assistance to ward off from the fragile conditions. More importantly, the de-ideologization process of the Michael Gorbachev's period²⁶ led to an end to the era of ideological confrontation, which had been the main concern of world politics in general and the Soviet-United States relations in particular¹. The perception is that such an involvement with the West made Gorbachev indifferent towards Russia's traditional friends like India²⁷. Therefore, Indo-Russian relations encountered many challenges, on account of changing dynamics in the global politics²⁸. Under such circumstances, India was apprehensive that Russia's economic reliance on the West would affect its reliability as a military supplier. Israel was seen, a better option, as a future supplier of the spare parts and military technology known then. Against this background, India began to divert its foreign policy *vis-à-vis* Russia and took steps to develop closer ties with the West. The very first two years after the end of the Cold War, specifically 1990-1992, there has been a major shift in Indo-Russian relations. But very soon, both countries realized each other geostrategic and geopolitical and economic significance for each other. New Delhi and Moscow began to engage each other in mutual initiatives and dialogues. The Moscow Declaration signed by the then Indian Prime Minister PV Nshima Rao and the Russian President Boris Yeltsin in July 1994 has been praised for raising the relationship to a strategic long-term level²⁹. Both the nations stood by each other on sensitive and crucial issues i.e. Kashmir and Chechnya. Russia engaged in India since 1998 in more joint research, development, and production of new military systems³⁰. Besides, Russia assisted India in the construction of Kudankulam nuclear plant with two reactors in Tamil Nadu. After 9/11 attacks against the United States, the then President George W. Bush collaborated with India in controlling and policing the strategically critical Indian Ocean sea lanes of communication links from the Suez Canal to Singapore. Since 2004, Washington and New Delhi have been pursuing a Strategic Partnership based on shared values and strategic interests. Both the countries signed arrange of economic, security, and global initiatives including famous civilian nuclear cooperation (123 Agreement) in 2008 to participate in each other's civil nuclear energy sector. The key developments in India and United States included the bilateral trade relationships, a geopolitical coalition to balance and to some extent contain the assertive China. India and the US share an extensive cultural, strategic, military, and economic relationship. As a result, after the 1990's India has diversified its foreign policy to meet its national interests and played an independent non-aligned card at the international level.

Indo-Russian Convergences and Divergences in the Central Asia

India and Central Asian republics had been enjoying geo-cultural and civilizational bonds since the recorded history. But during the spell of colonialism, the strands of historical relations enervated between both the regions. Even after the independent identity of Central Asia in 1990, this region has remained off the Indian foreign policy radar. With the onset of the New Great Game, India realized the strategic salience of the Central Asia. In order to give priority, India redesigned its foreign policy *vis-à-vis* Central Asia under various frameworks such as Look North Policy, Look West Policy, Extended Neighborhood, and the Connect Central Asia policy. Central Asia is also reciprocating Indian overture very positively and constructively. But the cooperation between India and Central Asia is facing many challenges from the external factors in the Central Asia. Hans J. Morgenthau pointed out that international relations and politics are always being guided by the national interests. The convergence of Indian and Russian geopolitical interests in the peace and security of the Central Asian region is historical³¹. In this respect, B.M. Jain indicates that President Putin's reassignment of strategic priorities to India reflects Moscow's concern over Pakistan's close ties with the Central Asian republics³². He argues that Pakistan supports for the rise of Islamic radicalism in Central Asia. Therefore, has a direct impact on the unity and security of both New Delhi and Moscow³³. Thus, the common threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism to their territories has called for active strategic cooperation between them³⁴ in Central Asia. Thus, India and Russia are likely to continue cooperating on a range of policies in order to balance Chinese influence and also countering extremist elements³⁵. India supports for Russia's concern for the safety and protection of the legitimate interests of the Russian-speaking people residing in Central Asia. In this context, India recognizes the dominant position of Russia in the former Soviet space. Russia too recognizes the central geopolitical position of India in the region. Despite, India and Russia are time tested friends still their interests are clashing from geopolitical, geostrategic and geo-economic aspects in the Central Asia. These divergences have originated from India's sense of trauma after Russia's separation from the subcontinent in the early 1990s, had forced New Delhi to adjust its foreign policy approach towards the West. On the other hand, the disparity between India and Russia in Central Asia has reflected New Delhi's new sense of its international identity in the context of its post-Pokhran II foreign policy strategy. Thus, their relations in Central Asia have exposed that the Indo-Russian ties are today very different from what it was in the Cold War period. Russia's main value to India is no longer strategic and ideological but straightforwardly and based on economics, it remained India's major supplier of arms and nothing more³⁶. Moreover, it has been stated that Russia is no longer in India's immediate neighborhood on account of the independent identity of Central Asian republics³⁷. Thus, the declining geographic

proximity between India and Russia in the post-Cold War era had made growing differences between their foreign policy perspectives, especially as they relate to Central Asia region. India has been outmaneuvered by Russia from Kyrgyzstan after sending the first installment of a new US one billion military aid package to the country. This follows the strategic impediment for India in 2010 and lost the access to the Tajikistan Ayni airbase.

The growing ties between Russia and China in Central Asia had persuaded Indian scholars and political scientists that both Russia and China share common security perceptions, multipolar world order. These authors argue that China is a more significant partner for Russia in Central Asia than India. So, they viewed China an automatically creator of a larger political space for the strategic partnership between them³⁸. Particularly, the sale of sophisticated arms and ammunition to China has generated concern to India. Therefore, for Moscow, the financial lure of Chinese investments will most likely override India³⁹. According to Pramit Pal Chaudhuri, "China is far more useful to Russia than India". Since the U.S. functions as the creator of political space for India to utilize its tactics both Afghanistan and Central Asia but, the U.S. withdrawal may decline India's ability to gain strategic footprints in both the countries⁴⁰. In addition, to China made suspicions at Indo-US nuclear cooperation probably induces it to take a vague view of India's tricks in Central Asia⁴¹. India has no pipeline accesses to Central Asia due to lack of land connectivity along with geopolitical constraints. Notwithstanding, sharing historical and geo-cultural relations with Central Asia, India is not figuring anywhere in the list of top ten countries involved in its hydrocarbon exploitation in Central⁴². India's Foreign Policy Options in Central Asia

After its emergence as an independent entity, Central Asia did not figure prominently in Indian foreign policy, though; both the Central Asian regions and India had been enjoying historical and civilizational relations. Even in the post-Cold War, the strands of bilateral relations became more fainter as Indian foreign policy priorities were obsessed with other parts of the world. After the onset of the New Great Game in Central Asia, India realized its diplomatic passivity *vis-à-vis* the region. India has geopolitical and geostrategic interests in the regions and in order to protect these interests, it reoriented its foreign policy in the frameworks such as Strategic Partnership, Look North Policy, Extended Neighborhood, and the Connect Central Asia Policy. India is a late entrant in the region. However, Indian leadership made their efforts to correct its earlier mistakes in order to strengthen its position in the region. In the contemporary times, it is generally observed that only military aspect of the strategic depth seems obsolete. Indeed, soft power and non-military engagement have become a part of the quest for strategic involvement. India has competed for stakes in several fields across in the Central Asia. These stakes have been facing many problems on account of the involvement of external powers in general and Russia in particular. In such

situation what options are left for Indian foreign policy, has to be examined holistically. India has to reframe its foreign policy *vis-a-vis* Central Asian countries to protect its myriad interests. The Connect Central Asia policy is one of its many frameworks which need to be more strengthened. This policy focused on many perspectives which include high-level visits, strategic partnerships, comprehensive economic engagements, cooperation in energy and natural resources. The implementation of the policy needs to be speeded up to boost the cooperative ties at higher stages. This will require allocation of definite resource for the implementation of this policy that may be the best way out the option to strengthen its hold in Central Asia. Besides, having mutual gains in securing reliable energy supplies and trade, India and Central Asia share a common vision for the unity and stability of the greater Central Asian region. Afghanistan is sharing border with Central Asia. Thus, its stability is significant not only for Central Asia rather it is also in the interests of India and Russia as well. Thus, India has to devise its strategy *vis-à-vis* Afghanistan in such a way that India, Central Asia, and Russia could cooperate with each other. India sees Afghanistan as a potential hub for geopolitical, geostrategic and geo-economic reasons, which links Central Asia with South Asia, and as a possible and most effective way to Iran and the Middle East. The Central Asian republics seek secular India's ties to combat the growing menace of religious extremism, violence, terrorism, arms and drugs trafficking, as Pakistan is doubtful for such cooperation due to fragile circumstances and historic reasons. India must exploit this opportunity. This will not only protect its own interests in the region rather there will be a considerable influence in the region. India's strategic presence in the Central Asian republics will be felt by other actors, increasing competition and adding new options for the Central Asian countries to diversify relations (Russia and China). India's challenge lies in exploiting opportunities for cooperation with all relevant players in Central Asia and to make an alliance and strategic nexus towards Russia, China and even with Iran. India should minimize frictions with these republics so as to build a geopolitical niche in the region. Another alternative to gain strategic leverage in Central Asia for India is to strengthen its relations through diplomatic talks, frequent high-level and official delegations visits. Alliance's, counter alliance and as a full-fledged member of SCO are also described as vital tools for enhancing the cooperation. Thus, India has realized that the organization will open new doors of cooperation. SCO will be the best option for the materialization of TAPI, Satpayev oil block⁴³. It will also make the successful realization of a memorandum of understanding for the supply of uranium to India from Central Asia, including the possible enhanced cooperation with Russia which favoring India's permanent SCO membership to check growing China. Due to India's geopolitical disadvantages and the current oil and gas exploration in Central Asia, India can hardly enter this field as an independent investor. The best alternative would be to cooperate with the West along with China⁴⁴. Judging energy policies in China and India, New Delhi may seek mutual benefits with China, rather than attempting to

challenge the more experienced nation in Central Asia. The cordial relations with China can also be effective for India in South Asia as well as in Central Asia from the peace and security point of view. Therefore, Improved India-China economic ties can be a good step for mutual gains and for the Afghan stability. Trade between India and Central Asia is growing but the huge potential exists in pharmaceuticals, IT, textiles, and automobile and down streaming technology. The Customs Union, as introduced by Russia can provide India space for enlarging its economics relationship with Russia as well as with Central Asia. Dr. Irina Orolbaeva, Ambassador of Kyrgyzstan to India, stated that India-Central Asia Dialogue, a Track-II initiative can also be a way to cooperate with each other in various sectors. Another scholar, Professor Mohanty stated that India should aim to promote educational exchanges with Central Asian Republics, provide greater access to cost-effective medical facilities and explore the option of anti-terrorism information exchanges with SCO. In addition to encouraging joint Russia-India IT projects in the region with the transfer of skills such as joint initiatives between the Indian and Russian IT sectors and the rising IT industry in Central Asia⁴⁵. In this sector Russia is programming and engineering talent which can be combined with India's skilled labor and well-developed IT services is also regarded as the best option for India to strengthen its ties.

Conclusion

After the break-up of the Erstwhile Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Russia was struggling to position herself internationally and decided to integrate with western structures and institutional frameworks in lieu of economic assistances. Russia's interest in its southern neighborhood particularly in Central Asia was enormously low, experiencing different kinds of transformations. Alexander Solzhenitsyn a Russian scholar wrote that the Central Asian countries were a liability for Russia, and Russia should leave them on their own. Therefore, no specific foreign policy Russia followed *vis-à-vis* the CARs under Boris Yeltsin's era. This transitional period allowed major powers and regional players in the Central Asian region. Besides, the region is endowed with rich natural resources that compelled them to give top priorities in their foreign policies *vis-a-vis* Central Asia. Besides, the 9/11 attacks had enhanced the importance of the region as a major area of international interest and engagement. Therefore, in this strategic environment, Russia drifted its foreign policy and took a greater interest in Central Asia, mainly in reaction to new partners foremost the United States, European Union and the China out of necessity. The regional actors such as Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, also attempted to fill the power vacuum. Thus, the region has turned a new geopolitical and geostrategic entity and became the target of global powers competing for domination and control. In this geostrategic chessboard of currents and cross currents of major powers and regional actors, India has to compete for stakes in several fields across in the Central Asia region. India has to reorient its foreign policy *vis-*

a-vis Central Asia in order to protect its multitude of interests. The Connect Central Asia policy is one of its many frameworks which need to be more strengthened, therefore, the implementation of the policy needs to be speeded up. Furthermore, to materialize its immediate and long-term interests in Central Asia India should reenergize its relations with china in general and Russia in particular both at bilateral and multilateral formats in Central Asia, because in such cobweb, complex and changing milieu, Russia seems likely to remain the most prominent external power, in terms of its high-level political relationships, common ethnicity, security cooperation and its series of economic investment projects in the region.

Reference

1. Khan A.H. (2013). Central Asia Centre of the new great game. *The Dialogue*, 4, 1, 63.
2. Macedo J. (2013). What is driving the US, Russia, and China in Central Asia's: New-Great Game? Gateway house 14, 4, 2
3. Malashenko A. (2012). Regional Instruments of Russian Influence in Central Asia, *FPRC*, 10, 25.
4. Chow E.C and Leigh L.E. (2010). Central Asia's Pipelines, Field of Dreams and Reality. The National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Special report, 3. "Pakistani officials are understandably disappointed at Russia's attitude", Pakistan Times, (January 31, 1993
5. Mihalka M. (2007). Not Much of a Game, Security Dynamics in Central Asia, *China-Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 5, 2, 21-39
6. Ganguly S., Liow C. and Scobell A. (2010). *Handbook of Asian Security Studies*, Rutledge, New York.
7. Micheal (2013). Defining geopolitics and strategy in Central Asia, *Journal of Eurasian studies* retrieved from <http://geopoliticsdefined.wordpress.com/>
8. Khan A.H. (2013). Central Asia Centre of the new great game. *The Dialogue*, 4, 1, 63
9. Sloan G. (1999). Sir Halford J. Mackinder, The Heartland Theory Then and Now, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 22, 3, 15-36.
10. Iseri E. (2009). The US Grand Strategy and the Eurasian Heartland in the Twenty-First Century, *Geopolitics*, 14, 1, 26-46.
11. Huasheng Z. (2009). Central Asian Geopolitics and China's security, *Strategic Analysis, Routledge*, 33, 4, 475-492.
12. Roy M.S. (2001). India's Interests in Central Asia, *Strategic Analysis*, 24, 12,
13. Anand V. (2006). Politico-military Developments in Central Asia and Emerging Strategic Equations. *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 4, 4, 167.
14. A Survey of Russian Federation Foreign Policy, MFA of the Russian Federation (2007),
15. Central Asia's Energy Risks, International Crisis Group, Asia Report, 133 (2007).
16. Torbakov I. (2007). The West, Russia, and China in Central Asia, What kind of game is being played in the region? *Transition Studies Review*, 14(1), 152-162.
17. Gonzalez F.J. (2013). The foreign policy concept of the Russian federation, A Comparative study. *Framework Document* retrieved from http://www.ieee.es/en/Galerias/fichero/docs_marco/2013.
18. Hamm G. (2013). Revisiting the Great Game in Asia, Rudyard Kipling and popular history, *International Journal*, 68, 2, 397.
19. Blank S. (2011). Challenges to Russia in Central Asia, *The Journal of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy*, 33, 6, 209-221.
20. Boris Z.R. (1993). The Gathering Storm in Central Asia, *Orbis*, 37, 1, 89.
21. Patnaik A. (2012). China and India in Central Asia, A new 'Great Game, *Central Asian Survey*, 31, 1, 83.
22. Halbach U. (2013). Afghanistan 2014, Shadows over Central Asia? *Security and Human Rights*, 24, 2, 137-146.
23. Usha K.B. (2012). India's Foreign Policy Priorities in Central Asia. *Foreign Policy Research Centre*, 10, 1, 108.
24. Stobdan P. (2008). Central Asia and India's security, *Strategic Analysis*, 28(1), 54-83.
25. Azhar M. (1999). The Emerging Trade Relation between India and Central Asia. Lancer Books, New Delhi
26. Golotyuk Y. (1996). Russia and India are experiencing a Military-Technical Renaissance, *Segodnya*, 27, 6, 2.
27. Singh I.A. (1995). A New Indo-Russian connection, *International Affairs*, 71, 1, 70.
28. Naik J.A. (1995). *Russia's Policy towards India, From Stalin to Yeltsin*, MD Publications, and New Delhi.
29. Dash P.L. (2007). Central Asia, Tulips have different hews. In Roy J.N. and Kumar B.B. (Eds.), *India and Central Asia, Classical to Contemporary Periods* (Pp. 190-210). New Delhi, Concept Publishing.
30. Kaushik D. (1997). India's Relations with Russia and China, An Overview. In Rasgotra M and Chopra V. D. (Eds.), *India's Relations with Russia and China, A New Phase* (45-58). New Delhi, Gyan Publishing.

31. Jain B.M. (2008). *Global Power, India's Foreign Policy, 1947-2006*, MD, Lexington Books, Lanham
32. Kaushik D. (1997). *India's Relations with Russia and China, An Overview*. In Rasgotra M and Chopra V.D. (Eds.), *India's Relations with Russia and China, A New Phase (45-58)*. New Delhi, Gyan publishing.
33. Jain B.M. (2008). *Global Power, India's Foreign Policy, 1947-2006*, MD, Lexington Books, Lanham.
34. Chopra V.D. (1997). *India's Relations with Russia and China, A New Phase*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi
35. Kaushik D. (1997). *India's Relations with Russia and China, An Overview*. In Rasgotra, M and Chopra, V.D. (Eds.), *India's Relations with Russia and China, A New Phase (45-58)*. New Delhi, Gyan Publishing
36. Singh N. (2006). *India, A Rising Power*, Authors Press, New Delhi.
37. Vanaik A. (2007). *Making India Strong, The BJP-Led Government's Foreign Policy Perspectives*. In McGuire, J. and Copland, I. (Eds.), *Hindu Nationalism and Governance (380-404)*. New Delhi, Oxford University Press.
38. Naik J.A. (1995). *Russia's Policy towards India, From Stalin to Yeltsin*, MD Publications, and New Delhi.
39. Bhattacharjea M.S. (2008). *Does China have a Grand Strategy?*. In Vohra P. and Ghosh P.K. (Eds.), *China and the Indian Ocean Region (1-19)*. New Delhi, National Maritime Foundation.
40. Gupta A. (2008). *The Reformist State, The Indian Security Dilemma*. In Gupta, A. (Eds.), *Strategic Stability in Asia (105-126)*. Ashgate, Aldershot.
41. Usha K.B. (2012). *India's Foreign Policy Priorities in Central Asia*. *Foreign Policy Research Centre*, 10, 1, 108.
42. Wishnick E. (2009). *Russia, china, and the united states in Central Asia*. *Strategic Studies Institute*, 122, 3, 27.
43. Laruelle and Balci B. (2010). *China and Indian Central Asia, A New "Great Game"*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York
44. Kumar S. (2013). *India and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Issues and Concerns*. *International Journal of China Studies*, 4(3), 348-350.
45. Qian L. (2013). *Cooperation, not confrontation better choice for India in Central Asian energy*. *Global Time*, Retrieved from <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/822728.shtml>.
46. Katherine Foshko K. (2012). *India in Central Asia, Time for a New Strategy*, Gateway House, Indian Council on Global Relations, Colaba, Mumbai.