

# Strategic significance of central asia to india politics essay



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1. Central Asia is the core region of the Asian continent and stretches from the Caspian Sea in the west to China in the east and from Afghanistan in the south to Russia in the north. It is also sometimes referred to as Middle Asia, and, colloquially, “the ‘stans” (as the five countries generally considered to be within the region all have names ending with the Persian suffix “-stan”, meaning “land of”) and is within the scope of the wider Eurasian continent. In modern contexts, all definitions of Central Asia include five republics of the former Soviet Union viz Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Other areas sometimes included are Afghanistan, Mongolia, eastern Iran and northern and western Pakistan, and sometimes Xinjiang and Tibet in western China, Jammu and Kashmir in northern India, and southern Siberia in eastern Russia[1]. The most popular and widely accepted definition of Central Asia includes the above five former Soviet republics. It was in 1991 that due to the sudden and rapid demise of the mighty Soviet empire in Central Asia and the collapse of communism, there sprang up, almost overnight, these five new countries that as a whole comprise the Central Asian Republics (CARs). This region has been subject to conquest and domination by European, Ottoman and Mongol rulers from the times of Alexander the Great to the modern imperial period, when Tsarist Russia and the British colonial power in the Indian sub-continent were locked in the ‘Great Game’[2] in pursuit of their spheres of influence, with Afghanistan serving as a ‘buffer’ between these two powers.

2. The Soviet collapse has given rise to new strategic circumstances. This region is now regarded as an energy and fuel reserve for the industrially developed countries. The ‘erstwhile strategic underbelly’ of Russia is again

vulnerable to a “ New Great Game”[3]. The degree of vulnerability increases with a shaky internal situation obtaining within these countries, which are facing a host of problems, notably political uncertainty, weak economy despite the economic potential and ethnic/cultural diversity. To make matters worse, the long-running civil war in Afghanistan has now drawn the threats of religious extremism, narco-terrorism and small arms proliferation.

3. The above developments have, therefore, added a new dimension to the strategic environment in South Asia in general and India in particular. It may be recalled that India had close historical, trade and cultural relations with Central Asia. All the turbulence in the chequered history of Central Asia has always had a spill over effect on India. Although India does not have direct borders with any of the CARs, it is situated in their close proximity and the region is of significant geo-strategic, geo-political and geo-economic significance for India. Positive and meaningful relations with the CARs would serve the Indian interests to a very large extent, especially with respect to its aspirations for a bigger role in the international arena.

4. The tremendous economic prospects and abundance of natural resources in the region, as also, the vacuum created in the Russian influence, have pulled US, EU, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, China and Japan into the region so as to serve their interests. In future, it will become a geo-political and geo-strategic flashpoint for U. S, Russian and Chinese interests because of the economic angle. Though India does not share directly her borders with the CARs, her geographic proximity and the dominant influences emerging in the region have a direct bearing on India’s strategic concerns. India was a late-starter on the Central Asian chessboard. India’s preoccupation in the first

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half of the 1990s with its economic difficulties, ongoing insurgency in J&K, and unstable political milieu prevented it from taking major political initiatives in Central Asia[4]. The strategic space it lost in the initial years was never regained. India chose to deal with CARs through Moscow and never really reached out to the newly formed republics. It was only after the economic progress and the nuclear tests conducted in 1998 that gave an assertive India the push and confidence to 'Look North' in search of energy for its economy and seek greater strategic engagement with the CARs.

5. The importance of CARs to India is in two contexts ie security and economic. The strategic importance of the Central Asian region for India emerges from these two major factors.

6. The Strengths.

(a) Geo-Strategic Location. The region is a land bridge between East Asia and Europe, between South Asia and Europe and between West Asia and East Asia/Europe.

(b) Economic Potential. It is clearly the rich reserves of hydrocarbons that bestow global significance on Central Asia. The ruling elites in these countries realise that the economic and political prospects of their countries depend totally on realizing this raw-material potential[5].

7. The New Great Game.

(a) The above strengths and inherent vulnerabilities arising out of the shaky breakup of the Soviet Union, in turn, have the potential of generating a New Great Game in the Central Asian Region. The superabundance of oil and gas  
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resources makes this region an epicenter of geo-political (more precisely, geo-economic) competition. The point is that, in contrast to the “ Big Game” played here earlier (involving mainly spheres of political and military influence), this time the competition centers on an attempt to establish control over natural resources. The moves of various powers to gain access in the region have now been justified in the garb of the ongoing fight against terrorism and prevention of spread of Islamic fundamentalism. Other countries too have joined the game in furtherance of their national/regional/global aspirations.

(b) As far as USA and Western powers are concerned, after the September 11 events, and the subsequent developments in Afghanistan[6], the CARs came again into prominence in the Western strategic calculations for its volatility and destabilizing effects on peace and security. As recent events show, there is a strong Western military presence led by the US in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan with the exception of Turkmenistan, which has propagated a policy of ‘ positive neutrality’.

(c) As regards Russia, all the Central Asian states have forged a distinctive relationship with Russia[7]. Due to geographical compulsions, they still depend on Russia for trade and transit/transportation of their energy resources. Moreover, the size of Russian population within each state determines this relationship. President Putin is pursuing policy of engagement in Central Asia in economic and military terms. Also, Russia and China have come together on a multi-lateral basis to ward off the threats of Western influence. In recent years, China on its own has sought to make a

strong presence in Central Asia to secure its strategic, economic and geopolitical interests[8].

(d) In addition to the above major global players, regional players like Turkey, Iran and Pakistan too have their interests at stake in the region.

(e) The Indian Context. In view of the above, the Central Asian Region assumes great significance for India, as it presents challenges of a different kind for India's foreign and security policies. Hithertofore, India had enjoyed a special relation with the republics under the Soviet regime. India was perhaps the only non-communist country which was allowed access to the CARs, albeit through Moscow, and gain ' glimpses of the hidden side of the Soviet Union' at that time[9]. With the unraveling of the USSR, India has lost this advantage to quite an extent. Despite Russian efforts to assert her influence in the region, the possibility of increased influence of the other regional and world powers over the CARs is a reality. The process of political transition and the final orientation of these new states cannot fail to affect the strategic environment for India. Further, India is handicapped with no direct land link with the CARs.

8. Central Asia with its Islamic roots, proximity to Afghanistan, energy resources and volatile internal situation is a potential conflict area in which stability revolves around world politics, as also its internal situation. Any instance of instability in this region will have a significant impact on the stability and security of the South Asian region. Thus there is a strong need for India to protect her national interests with positive engagement of the CARs.

## **GEO-STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE**

### **Geographical Dimension**

9. The prophetic words of Sir Halford Mackinder, a noted geo-political commentator of his times underline the geo-strategic importance of the region. In his geo-political theory of the heartland, he propagated that “ He who rules the heartland, rules Asia. He who rules Asia, rules the world.” Mackinder considered Central Asia as the centre of the world and reasoned that “ It is the greatest natural fortress in the world defended by polar ice caps, deserts, mountain ranges and arid zones. It is the largest land mass in the world and whosoever controls it, exercises enormous power because he is, therefore not dependent on sea power”. This region can more appropriately be called as a zone of convergence of the major geo-cultural regions of Eurasia, with its secular interactions spanning both these continents. Mackinder’s heartland theory was enthusiastically supported during the course of the “ Great Game” played by Russia and Great Britain in this region. The theory was vindicated in World War II when Central Asia provided enormous strategic depth and space to USSR in her mortal conflict with Nazi Germany.

10. In the present context, the CARs southern borders rest partly on war-torn Afghanistan and Iran, Russia lies to the North, China’s Xinjiang – Uighur Autonomous Region to the East and Caucasus Region, which is also a flash point to the West. The proximity of China, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and Russia, each with its self interests at cross purposes with the others, makes this a potential region for volatile clashes between neighbouring powers. Thus the

security implications of this region are bound to have ramifications in both the continents of Europe and Asia and particularly India.

11. Another unique feature of the location of this region is that it is totally land locked. Even the access of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan to the Caspian Sea does not give them access beyond their immediate neighbours. Being land locked states, getting access to the southern seas to be linked with the world market is very important for them. Similarly, the influence of its neighbours on the region is directly related to their ability to provide the region with access to the sea.

12. Another factor is its location next to what may be termed as a geo-strategic melting pot, West Asia. The cross currents of Arab-Israeli rivalry, intra-Arab hostility and the ongoing war against terrorism, have all combined to keep this oil rich region in a state of continuous turmoil and instability, leading to periodic wars. In the changed geo-political environment, it is not entirely unlikely that the CARs may now be dragged into these conflicts, with some scholars already talking in terms of a ' Greater Middle East'.

## **GEO-POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

13. Owing to its persistent economic woes, Russia is neither willing, nor actually in a position to shoulder aid burden to the CARs and make sizeable investments in their economies. No wonder, all the CARs are diversifying their political and economic ties with the outside world. The geo-political importance of these states and their abundant oil and gas reserves and other natural resources are attracting the USA and other industrialized countries that have surplus investible capital and technology eagerly sought



by these republics. The CARs are also looking towards West-dominated multilateral financial institutions like the World Bank, IMF, EBRD and Asian Development Bank, etc., for loans. Large US, European, Japanese and South Korean corporations have signed big deals with the CARs for investment in their energy and infrastructure sectors[10].

14. There is little hope that any of the five countries could adopt an independent course and mobilize its political and economic resources to exercise overall leadership in the area in the foreseeable future. Perhaps, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are the only republics, which can function as regional anchors in Central Asia.

## **GEO-ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE**

15. Given its enormous natural riches, Central Asia holds the key that will shape the strategic environment of the region in the decades to come. The current surge of interest in post-Soviet Central Asia derives largely from the fact that the region lies in the centre of the trade interests of Europe and Asia. The geo-economic significance should be viewed in light of the poor economic status inherited from Russia, as also the painful transition to privatisation, which the CARs are undergoing at present. These factors, coupled with the natural riches fashion the strategic calculations of outside powers.

## **An Assessment of the Oil and Natural Gas Reserves**

16. Central Asia has been seen as a significant new producer of hydrocarbons. However, care must be taken so as not to greatly exaggerate the scale of resource base in the Caspian. It must also be noted that while

the Caspian could be important as a source of hydrocarbons, it will not even begin to approach the Middle East as an oil hub. Estimates of Caspian Basin oil reserves as under[11]:-

## **Proven Reserves Oil reserves Share of total world**

### **(billion barrels) oil reserves(%)**

Azerbaijan 7. 0 0. 6

Kazakhstan 39. 6 3. 3

Turkmenistan 0. 5 0. 042

Uzbekistan 0. 6 0. 05

17. Reasonable oil production scenarios project that the Caspian Basin will eventually produce about 191 billion barrels or 10 percent of total world oil production as compared to Saudi Arabia's 300 billion barrels proven reserves.

18. The world resources of natural gas were assessed at about 400 trillion cubic meters in 1990s; of these 142. 1 trillion cubic meters were proven. Russia alone has 48. 8 trillion cubic meters of proven reserves. Taking into account other probable resources, the total amount of natural gas in the region is assessed at about 12-16 trillion cubic meters or about 8-12 percent of current world gas reserves. The share of the Central Asian nations are as under[12]:-

## **Proven Reserves Gas reserves Share of total world (trillion cubic meters) gas reserves (%)**

Azerbaijan 1. 4 0. 8

Kazakhstan 3. 0 1. 7

Turkmenistan 2. 9 1. 6

Uzbekistan 1. 9 1. 0

19. However, the advantage which the Caspian oil and gas enjoy over the Russian energy resources is that it is more competitive in the world energy market. The total cost of production of oil in Kazakhstan is between \$ 2. 70-2. 90 per barrel as against \$ 5. 30-7 per barrel in Russia. Similarly, Caspian gas is more competitive and may edge out Russia from the growing regional markets.

### **Lost Opportunities[13]**

20. When the Central Asian republics attained independence, they looked forward to India playing a prominent role as a major partner in all spheres of activity. Unfortunately India was unable to optimally convert the traditional goodwill into contemporary influence. Although this is changing now, the Indian presence and visibility in this part of the world still remains extremely poor. India's economic relations have woefully lagged behind the political relationship, principally because India is not economically rich enough, nor is its business, industrial and financial community aggressive enough to overcome India's geographical and other handicaps in dealing with Central Asia.

21. From the perspective of the Central Asian countries, India has not been able to make a significant contribution to their immediate priorities viz. their search for national identity, security and, more recently, regime survival. Nor has it given meaningful help in their economic development. Thus India occupies a somewhat lower priority in the foreign policies of the Central Asian countries, at least in a short-term perspective.

22. Due to the clash of interests of major players like Russia, US and China, the Central Asian countries continue to have some expectations that India would play a much larger role in Central Asia, and consider India as a potential balancing factor to the other major players in the region. However, India's good relations with Russia and the fact that it is a relatively minor player in Central Asia restrict its role as an effective balancing force. India's major dilemma and constraint is how to access Central Asia due to its geographical location. Given its inherent handicaps, India cannot achieve its objectives by acting on its own in Central Asia. As a geographical area that abuts on the borders of major powers in Asia, including India, Central Asia will always attract a foreign presence. It is a "negative security space", which the major powers cannot afford to let other powers or forces dominate. Thus, in order to protect and preserve its interests in the region, India has no alternative but to closely consult and cooperate with the other major powers that have an interest and a presence in Central Asia.

### **Present State of Affairs in CARs as Affecting India**

23. Prior to seeing India's interests in Central Asian Region, it is necessary to undertake an analysis of the present state of affairs in CARs as affecting

India. The analysis is as given out in under mentioned paragraphs.

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24. Ethnic and Religious Tensions. The pattern of ethnic and religious tensions has a direct bearing on India's security as they could engulf India since India too has a sizable population of same religious denomination. Kashmir is especially vulnerable due to its contiguity and existing militancy. Any eruption of conflict in the region gives Pakistan a chance to play a bigger role in the CARs[14], which has dangerous portents for India.

25. Orientation of CARs. With the reduction in Russia's strategic position in the region, the relatively benign environment for India has been disturbed. Although Russia is asserting herself to regain control, the efforts by other regional powers continue. The ultimate orientation of the CARs is significant for India as at least two countries, Pakistan and China, attempting to project themselves in the region are inimical to India. Iran too poses a threat to India's interests in as much as a nexus between China, Pakistan and Iran can be formed and if Iran chooses to forego the present moderate stance in its engagement with CARs.

26. Security Environment. The regional security environment has also got diluted. The erstwhile Soviet Union had not only shouldered the responsibility for security in Central Asia, it has acted as a counterweight against forces antagonistic towards India. However, the Russian Collective Security umbrella is some relief for India.

27. Economic Potential. The tremendous economic potential of the CARs have been brought out earlier in this study. However, the issue needing attention is that CARs are not the major economic partners of India. At the end of the Eighties, the Soviet Union accounted for 16 percent of India's

exports and 6 percent of India's imports, out of which Russia accounted, and still accounts, for 80 percent of trade with India. A large portion of the remaining trade is with Ukraine. Now also the CARs just account for less than 3 percent of the trade. Expansion of trade seems to be constrained, in spite of huge markets/nation building, primarily due to the combination of factors like geography, political hurdles linked to the situation in Afghanistan and emergence of new competitors in the domestic markets of these republics, namely China, Turkey, Iran and USA.

28. Islamisation. If the CARs become an Islamic entity, then Pakistan may be able to gather more support against India in the Islamic and international fora.

29. Growing Influence of China. The threat of China-Pakistan and China-Pakistan-Iran nexus is dangerous for India's security. China's influence in the region will provide her with a ' backdoor' to India. India and China's trade interests in the region, as far as exports are concerned, are also likely to clash.

30. Drug Traffic. A Pakistan-Afghan control of the region will make it difficult for India to check the flow of drug traffic to her territory through Kashmir as narcotics trade in Central Asia increases.

31. CARs- A Conflict Zone. There are possibilities of an interest clash in the CARs over economic resources and even territorial acquisitions. Clash between Russia and China, Russia and USA, China and USA, Iran and Afghanistan are a distant but distinct possibility. A conflict zone in India's backyard can only be a problem for her.

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## **India's Interests in Central Asian Region**

32. The analysis of the state of affairs in the CARs as affecting India bring out that however marginal India's interests may have been in the region in the past, the geo-political and geo-economic realities and the regional security environment makes the CARs significant enough for India to reformulate her policies to protect her interests in the region. Therefore, India's interests in the

region need to be identified. These are:-

(a) Economic interests, with particular reference to energy security (as an alternative to Gulf) and opening avenues for the consumer market. The opening of the region to the outside world has directly reduced India's economic pre-dominance in the region. India, in the midst of its economic growth, cannot afford to lose out on this opportunity, especially in view of her already established trade relations. It needs to take steps to ensure a dynamic economic partnership with the CARs, which in turn, would also help her security interests.

(b) Security interests to include Kashmir issue, spread of Islamic fundamentalism, arms proliferation, smuggling of fissile materials including WMDs and drug trafficking. These issues have a direct bearing on India's security, especially keeping in mind that the major source of initiation is through Pakistan.

(c) Regional interests and aspirations, with particular reference to countering Pakistan's moves and China's long term design. Russia's reassertion of her prominence in the security scheme of the region lacks the clout it had earlier

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as the CARs gain confidence and begin to break free from Russian shackles to predicate their own national interests. With China and Pakistan attempting to establish their influence on the republics, India has a cause to worry.

(d) Global interests, with particular reference to playing a meaningful role in the geo-political evolution of the region, particularly its stability. The CARs should acquire economic strength and political stability for genuine independence and non-alignment rather than becoming an arena for a new 'Great Game' between USA, China and Russia.