

Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS)

“Central Asian Republics (CARs): Internal and External Dimensions Including Opportunities for India”

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan approaches closer and the Afghan security forces gear up to take the responsibility of maintaining peace and order, the neighboring Central Asian countries fear a deadly spill over of instability following the drawdown. 2014 will be significant in terms of having a symbolic and psychological impact upon not just the Afghan people and the Taliban but also the international community.

Central Asia is an ethnic cauldron - prone to instability and conflicts, without a sense of national identity. It is a mesh of historical- cultural influences, tribal and clan loyalties and religious fervor. Border disputes, Islamic extremism, human trafficking, water dispute, drug trafficking and ethno-regionalism have become key concerns in this region.

The seminar looked into the following issues:

- the internal dimensions of CARs to including demography, cultural, ethnic and religious linkages, the process of democratisation/ governance and threat from radical Islamic groups, natural resources and the contentious issues.
- unfolding of global and regional developments.
- India's relations with CARs and the road ahead.

Internal Dynamics

- The region's socio-economic growth has been slow due to lacking infrastructure, lack of national identities and non evolution of democratic institutions and system of governance resulting in various internal and intra region challenges. Consequently, it has increased the dependence of these countries on Russia and other regional countries for trade, security, technology etc.
- From the security point of view, terrorist organizations like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which has recently taken the responsibility of the Karachi airport attack in June 2014 and others like East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement are a cause of concern to India and threat to regional security.
- The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is an active terrorist organisation having close links with Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Haqqani network based

in FATA. The group has carried out numerous attacks in the region and was involved in the process of overthrowing President Islam Karimov.

- The region produces poppy seeds and cannabis and is a major smuggling route for drug supply from Afghanistan. If the drug and crime situation continues, then it will destabilise the region and especially the regime in Kyrgyzstan.
- Kazakhstan with its unaccounted nuclear weapons and fissile materials stockpiles poses a threat to the regional and global security.

External Dynamics

- The new Chinese – Eurasian corridor, proposed North-South corridor, the economic corridor from Xinjiang to Gwadar, and a still under study rail-road connectivity to Afghanistan across the Wakhan corridor, will alter the geo-political landscape of this region and India would get impacted.
- The proposed trans-Caspian pipelines would allow western markets easier access to Kazakh oil, and potentially Uzbek and Turkmen gas as well. However, given Russia's opposition to the trans-Caspian pipeline based on environmental degradation of the fragile eco-system and maritime disputes with Iran has reduced the possibility of transporting energy from this area to the western world via Turkey.
- Russia and China are trying to exert their influence in the region through external economic treaties and organisations like Eurasian Economic Union and Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Central Security Treaty Organization giving rise to long-term strategic competition.

Indian Strategy: 'Connect Central Asia Policy'

- The 'Connect Central Asia' policy is a big step in conceptualising and ideating on what can be done for moving from a theoretical concept of 'an extended neighbourhood' to what can be done in order to get closer to these countries more effectively to further India's interests.
- The policy aims to build upon political connections through the exchange of high level visits, strengthening strategic and security cooperation through military training, joint research and close consultations on Afghanistan.
- India has also taken forward its defence diplomacy by opening defence wings alongside its embassies in all five Central Asian countries and conducted joint exercises besides counter-terrorism dialogues.

Lessons for India

- Although the Central Asian region forms the part of India's extended neighbourhood, lack of land connectivity with the region has put India in the trail and stymied its progress preventing it from promoting trade and diplomatic relations.
- Most of the CAR countries do not have domestic manufacturing capacity or capability which has made them heavily dependent on imports. Indian private sector which has been active all over the world has not made the same impact in the region as compared to other countries which despite having no land connectivity with Central Asia, have been doing extremely well.