



Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS)

Seminar on

Central Asian Republics: Internal and External Dimensions Including Opportunities for India

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Seminar Report

As the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan approaches closer, and Afghan security forces gear up single handed to take the responsibility of maintaining order and peace in the conflict ridden country, the neighbouring Central Asian Republics(CARs) 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 citizens, the Taliban, terrorists but also the international community.

Comprising of five former Soviet Union republics-Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, Central Asia is an ethnic cauldron - prone to instability and conflicts, without a sense of national identity, but rather a mesh of historical- cultural influences, tribal and clan loyalties and religious fervour. Border disputes, Islamic extremism, human trafficking, water dispute, drug trafficking and ethno-regionalism have become key concerns in this region.

The presence of vast energy resources in the region has fundamentally altered the strategic importance of the region in international politics. Projecting influence into the area is no longer just Russia but also Turkey, Iran, China, Pakistan, the United States and India, who are seeking dominance over Central Asian energy resources. In the global power shift, the geopolitical developments in Central Asia will have a significant impact on India, as it forms an extended neighbourhood. This area is compact with immense strategic importance critical for India's security. With the ensuing changes taking place in Afghanistan; it has only increased the relevance to understand the developments of this chessboard, which are heavily influenced by: border disputes, Islamic extremism, human trafficking, water dispute, narco-terrorism and ethno-regionalism.

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.

Key Issues and Views Emerging from Discussions by the Panellists and the Interactive Sessions

Internal Dynamics

The geographical attribute of the Central Asian countries that they are landlocked offers a geo-strategic centrality and affects the geopolitics of this region. This has three key dimensions. First one is the Eurasian Bridge, which connects Asia with Europe. Second is the buffer dimension where the inverted green crescent is coming about and India, China, Russia, look at it as a buffer to protect them from the radiating green crescent. The third is the spring-board dimension. Historically, invasions into Indian subcontinent have been launched from this region and that is partly the reason why the Americans were interested in a forward strategic base in this area because then they could have manipulated the strategic environment of the region to serve their long term strategic interests.

The region is rich in natural resources but has very scant population; however it has been a place for the inter-mingling of cultures, civilizations and faiths and as a consequence of that, there is no monolithic Islamic culture. It is a multi-ethnic clan-based society with adherents of a syncretic culture. It is at the cusp of socio-political transition and it is a geo-political pivot in the contemporary balance of power in Eurasia.

Country Profiles

- **Kazakhstan**-has the largest economy in the region and the second largest population. It shares a long open border with Russia and has 24 per cent of the population which is Russian (shrinking rapidly). Succession of President Nursultan Nazarbayev is a major point of contention as there is yet no consensus. A rough political transition could be a flashpoint in the internal politics of Kazakhstan.
- **Turkmenistan**- the importance of the country lies in sharing approximately a 1000 kilometre of border with Afghanistan. It has a soft stance towards Taliban and professes strict neutrality in its approach in Foreign Policy affairs. It is not a member of any of the regional blocs in that region but has shown better economic progress.
- **Uzbekistan** - has a monarchy and portrays itself as a regional hegemon. It is however not an economically strong country as it does not have strong energy resources as compared to the other countries in the region. Uzbekistan shares borders with all the CARs and has major border issues and water disputes. The issue of succession of the reigning king is also a major concern.
- **Kyrgyzstan** - is a very small country and has witnessed a series of people's revolutions. Since 2005, four presidents have changed and the country has graduated from a dysfunctional presidential form to a fledgling democracy which has not fully settled down. There is a major socio-economic distress in the country and it ranks poorly on the Human Development Index. It majorly depends on the remittances sent by the Kyrgyz nationals staying overseas especially Russia and finances from the American base that was set-up in Kyrgyzstan.

- **Tajikistan** - it shares a long and rugged border with Afghanistan. About 15.3 per cent of Uzbeks live in Tajikistan and a similar number of Uzbeks live in Kyrgyzstan particularly in the southern parts of the region, leading to ethnic rivalries and clashes since 2005.

Ethnic and Demographic Tensions in Fergana Valley

Fergana Valley is the most populous and prosperous region in Central Asia which is facing tensions due to high population and ethnic conflicts. During the Soviet era, there was no clear demarcation of the borders and they were created arbitrarily without taking into consideration the natural demographic and geographical boundaries. Therefore, in the Soviet era, Fergana valley looked like one homogenous socio-political entity as the resources were being controlled. Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, this area has become a flashpoint as far as the internal dimensions are concerned. The 1990 clash between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks killed over 600. This was followed by the civil war in Tajikistan in 1992, the Tulip revolution in 2005 in Kyrgyzstan when the President had to flee and in 2005 again, during the Andijan uprising in Uzbekistan. The valley recently witnessed riots in 2010, when 200 people were killed and around 100,000 were displaced.

Water Dispute

The region of Central Asia is water stressed and is dependent on its water resources from Amu Darya and the Syr Darya which emanates from Kyrgyzstan and drain out into the Aral Sea. The problem of the Aral Sea really started when Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan started drawing the water for their cotton cultivation in the 1950s. One of the four largest lakes in the world, the Aral Sea has been steadily shrinking since 1960s after the Soviet government diverted the two rivers feeding the sea, as part of its irrigation projects. The sea lost three quarters of its volume, half its surface area and shoreline retreated by 100km. The receding of the Aral Sea has left vast swathes of toxic material at its bottom raising environmental concerns. Most of the land in Kyrgyzstan and particularly in the Fergana Valley, in Uzbekistan and southern part of Kazakhstan are dependent for their irrigation on these river waters. In the early 2000s, Kazakhstan started a project with World Bank and by 2008, 90 per cent of the original expanse of the Aral Sea has been restored.

Upper riparian states like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan who have no natural energy or oil resources have proposed construction of hydroelectric dams on Amu Darya and Syr Darya - Rogun Dam (Tajikistan) and Kambarata Dam (Kyrgyzstan) to generate electricity and export it to other countries. This has led to conflict with the lower riparian country like Uzbekistan which is against the construction of hydroelectric projects as it can limit the flow of water. President Karimov has said that the Rogun Dam will give Tajikistan unfair control over water resources and such projects could lead to "not just serious confrontations, but even wars".

Religious Extremism

Historically, the rise of militancy in this region came to the fore with the Bacchii movement who resisted the ingress of the Soviets. Subsequently the civil war in Tajikistan produced two strong leaders Juma Namangan and Tehir Yuldashev who had been fighting alongside Taliban against the Soviets in Afghanistan. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan has also been very active with close networks with Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Haqqani network in FATA. They have been involved in numerous attacks in the region and were involved in the process of overthrowing President Islam Karimov. The other prominent militant groups are the Uzbek Islamic Jihad Union

which professes a Salafi ideology with a mission to oust Karimov and the Hizbul –ut-Tehrir. All the militant organisations in the region adhere to al Qaeda's extremist ideology with plans of establishing a Caliphate in Khoristan which includes the CARs along with Xinjiang, Iran, Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan. The porous border along Afghanistan provides an easy access to the Central Asia which has become home to a number of militant groups from Europe and Middle East. In event of Taliban returning to power in Afghanistan post US troop's withdrawal, it will strengthen the militant groups in Central Asia, giving further rise to extremism.

Security

From the security point of view, terrorist organisations like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which took the responsibility of the recent Karachi airport attack in June 2014 and others like East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement are a cause of concern to India. Since, there is a great deal of mobility in terrorist groups; India needs to closely monitor the activities of the anti-social elements from this region and their tie ups with various Pak based anti India groups. By consolidating its relations with Central Asia's secular and friendly countries on issues like counter-terrorism, trade and energy supplies, India can work towards regional solutions including the threat from Afghanistan.

Drug Trafficking

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, it will certainly destabilize the region especially the regime in Kyrgyzstan. The nexus between the politicians and terrorists along with the complicity of Border Guards and Custom Officials makes it difficult to deal with the situation. Narco-terrorism is a reality in Central Asia and it is the drug –money which supports this.

Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction

There are number of places where this fissile material which is also called 'orphan material' has been abandoned by scientists, industrial workers, agriculturalists. This material is never properly accounted for. The US troops have also found traces of nerve and mustard gas at Kashi-Khanabad airfield. This was also accompanied by testing and storage of biological weapon in Vozrozhdeniye Islands in the Aral Sea. Kazakhstan has become a store house where nuclear weapons and fissile materials are stocked in caskets.

External Dynamics

Strategic Transportation and Energy Corridors

The new Chinese – Eurasian corridor once completed will reduce travelling time by 10-12 days and costs by 20 per cent in comparison with the Suez route. The proposed North-South corridor when constructed will intersect the Chinese-Eurasian corridor in Central Asia. The corridor from Xinjiang to Gwadar, a China - Pak collaboration for economic development will provide access to China to Gwadar, located at the entrance of the Persian Gulf about 75 km east of Iran border. From the Indian perspective, early operation of Chabahar and thereafter Iran's roads into Afghanistan changes the dynamics of the region because firstly India will have to a large extent made the centrality of Pakistan irrelevant, provided an outlet to Afghanistan to get into the Arabian Sea and it would get an access to reach the Central Asian republics. The Chinese have already carried out a feasibility study on how to connect their western highway with the Karakoram

highway. Pakistan too has carried out feasibility studies on how to make different road arteries from Karakoram highway to Afghanistan. There are uncorroborated reports about the Chinese having carried out the feasibility study of having rail-road connectivity to Afghanistan across the Wakhan corridor. If these developments take place, they will alter the geo-political landscape of this region and India would get impacted.

The Caspian Sea Dispute

The Caspian Sea flanked by Kazakhstan, Russia, Azerbaijan, Iran and Turkmenistan is rich in oil and natural gas resources. During the Soviet era, there was equal distribution of the Caspian between the Soviets and Iran. The maritime borders of the sea have been in dispute since the breakup of the Soviet Union over the division: sectorial split or equal share. Currently Russia enjoys monopoly over export routes for Central Asian energy resources. The proposed trans-Caspian pipelines would allow western markets easier access to Kazakh oil, and potentially Uzbek and Turkmen gas as well. The gas export route that circumvents Russia would require Russia to pay higher prices and also break its monopoly over Central Asian energy. 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.

Multi Vector Foreign Policy and Role of External Players

The CARs have a partnership programme with NATO which is training the countries in combating terrorism, disaster management, drug trafficking and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. This is a sore point with China and Russia as they do not want NATO to make inroads into this region.

The five Central Asian countries also have a membership with Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Central Security Treaty Organisation. They have established a regional anti-terrorism cell at Bishkek and created rapid reaction forces which have been training for scenarios to deal with terror activities.

Eurasian Economic Union has also entered the region with an objective to reduce the Chinese influence in this region. Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan signed a treaty on 29 May 2014 (to be implemented from 01 January 2015) to establish an economic union on the lines of European Union. The treaty would cover about 171 million people. Other countries in the region, Tajikistan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan are being coerced to join this organization. The EEU is a brain-child of President Vladimir Putin who aims for Russian dominance in trade and economy in the region. Though Russia and China have been cooperating in the short-term alignment to counter the US, a long-term strategic competition between Russia and China will manifest sooner or later.

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 done reasonably well globally has so far not made the same impact in this region as compared to other countries which despite having no land connectivity with Central

Asia, have been doing extremely well. For instance- South Korea and Japan have well established in the areas of infrastructure investments, joint –ventures, telecommunications, transportation and power generation. India's private sector has a big market readily available for investments in information technology, pharmaceuticals and other sectors. Central Asia as a region is rich in natural and energy resources and offers great potential of trade and an opportunity to achieve the energy security. Kazakhstan is likely to become the tenth largest oil producing nation and has the potential to become the leading producer in Uranium. India is in talks with both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to collaborate on coal mining and uranium.

Policy Trends in Eurasia

India needs five different policies and policy instincts in keeping with the distinct nature of the five CAR countries. However, they are clubbed together often for convenience as they share some overarching similarities.

- Growing rivalry between Russia and China over dominance over the Eurasian space and the signing of the Eurasian Economic Treaty.
- China's overwhelming presence in this region.
- The events of 9/11 and US invasion of Afghanistan has moved the theatre of action towards the south of Central Asia. The security calculus is likely to change dramatically on withdrawal of NATO forces and outcome of elections in Afghanistan.
- After the independence of CARs in 1991, the discovery of hydrocarbons in the region has been significant not only for them but also for India as it is the largest consumer of energy.

'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 moving closer to these countries more effectively to seek India's interest whether in the field of security or energy or in terms of trade and commerce. 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 initiating defence wings in all five Central Asian countries and conducted joint exercises along with counter-terrorism dialogues. With the help of flagship projects (North-South Corridor, hospitals), development partnerships, capacity building, the process of connecting India with the Central Asian nations would be hastened. Harnessing on the influx of Central Asian students into India, a new Central Asian University has been proposed. India is focussed on achieving a smart power strategy with innovative high- impact projects, leveraging the enormous goodwill in the region to meet its core objective through its 'Connect Central Asia policy'.

Routes between India and Central Asia

To connect India to Central Asia by land the following short-term, mid-term and long term projects are envisioned:

- **Short Term Strategy:** The short-term strategy includes the North-South transport corridor which would connect India to Central Asia through St. Petersburg. A pilot study has been conducted to understand the key problem areas, both in terms of infrastructure and software. India has taken the initiative of completing an alternate corridor that will go through Iran.
- **Medium Term Strategy:** Apart from the Chabahar port in Iran another route to Central Asia particularly to Uzbekistan and to Tajikistan which will use the trans-Afghan routes and benefit Afghanistan as well is under consideration.
- **Long Term Strategy:** India is looking at pipelines which include TAPI and the Iran-Pakistan-India pipelines. The TAPI pipeline is at a stage where a consortium is needed to build the pipeline and talks are on with Turkmenistan extensively. This project is hailed as a paradigm shift in idea which will allow hydrocarbons to be brought from Central Asia to South Asia, from North to South. The earlier paradigm however was that only Russia could export region's hydrocarbons into Europe.