

Central Asia and its Geo-Politics

PS MANN

Since times immemorial Central Asia (CA) has been a playing field for invaders who ventured forth from their own territories to stake their fortunes on this vast, beckoning region and have subjected it to unrestrained savagery. In 327BC.¹ Alexander after the conquest of Persia descended onto the expansive open tracts of present day Uzbekistan before turning towards the Hindukush and onward invasion across the Indus. At Samarkand he married Roxane who gave birth to his son Alexander IV. In the thirteenth century Genghiz Khan subjugated CA after a bloody five year campaign. Most conservative scholars place the death toll in this invasion at 15 million² thus earning Genghiz Khan the epithet 'Scourge of Asia'. Timurlane, who claimed descent from Genghiz Khan's direct blood line, ruled major parts of CA with his marauding ways and tyrannical policies from 1336 to 1405 A.D. The surge of the Russian revolution deposed his last descendant Amir Khan, the Amir of Bukhara in 1920 A.D. The eighteenth century witnessed two great powers - Tsarist Russia and Great Britain - play the 'Great Game' on the chessboard of this region to secure new frontiers for strategic depth to their respective empires (Russia to the north and imperial India to the south). In 1907, at the Anglo-Russian convention both sides agreed to Russian domination north of 40 parallel and British sway to the south of 30 parallel. Despite this, Russia enjoyed the suzerainty of CA (traditionally called Turkestan) and administered it as one entity through local chieftains and Amirs. Historically, the division of Turkestan into five distinct republics took place after the 'October revolution'. In the ensuing period of unrest, the Bolsheviks ruthlessly curbed Pan Turkic

challenges to impose communism, Russification and Sovietisation on the locals. Regardless of ethnic, social and territorial historiography, Stalin in 1936 arbitrarily demarcated the region into five Soviet Socialist Republics - Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan - and integrated them into the Soviet Union. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 these republics, on the basis of their newly defined boundaries (Map 1), gained independence and are now sovereign nations commonly referred to as Central Asian Republics (CARs). While these nations are still taking stock of their unexpected and gifted independence, the abundance of their wealth of unexplored natural resources and their geostrategic location, have already brought powerful players - Russia, USA, China and Iran - to the 'New Great Game'; this time with much wider security and economic ramifications. India with immense economic and strategic stakes in the region, can ill afford to play to the gallery in this game for India enjoys tremendous good will amongst these republics.

Social Unrest and Political Spectrum

For centuries, CA enjoyed a distinct regional identity of being a major component of Turkestan stretching from Turkey in the west to Xinjiang (China) in the east – along the underbelly of the erstwhile Soviet Union - and remained a single though somewhat loosely administered entity. Stalin's arbitrary demarcation of boundaries caused inevitable spill over of ethnic populations across these states. An emerging sense of nationalism and pulls and pressures of new found freedom has developed fissures along ethnic lines among communities and races that, for centuries, enjoyed harmonious cultural and ethnic affinity. Expatriate Russians, brought here as a result of Stalin's whimsical policies of 'collectivism' and multiculturalism as the basis of 'Sovietisation', still constitute 20-23% of the total population of CARs. Tajikistan³ suffered the first blow from this polarization. In 1992, the power struggle in Tajikistan amongst Rastakhiz (for closer ties with Iran), Islamic Renaissance Party supported by Afghan warlords Ahmed Shah Masood and Hykmetyar demanding return to Islamic ways, Lalli Badakshan yearning for autonomy in Badakshan and Democratic Party espousing democratization led to a bloody civil war. The situation was brought under control with the help of Russian and Uzbek forces leading to a UN brokered ceasefire in Dec 1997. Five years of civil war left a grim trail with 30,000 dead, millions displaced and a shattered economy. Of the 4,00,000 ethnic Russians who stayed back in Tajikistan and provided the technical workforce for the industry, 3,75,000 fled the country. The government, still reeling under the effects of civil

war, needs economic resuscitation and cannot sustain itself without foreign aid. Neighboring Kyrgyzstan too suffered political and social upheaval. In April 2010, a nationwide stir forced President Bakiyev to resign and leave the country and a parliamentary system of government was introduced; the only state to adopt a truly democratic system. This followed the worst ethnic riots⁴ in south Kyrgyzstan - Osh and Jalalabad (bordering Uzbekistan and Tajikistan respectively). Four days of rioting left 470 dead, scores injured and many houses mainly of Uzbeks reduced to rubble. The state police and even the federal army, predominantly Kyrgyz, allegedly played a partisan role. Apparently 3,00,000 (mainly Uzbeks community) were forced to leave their homes and 1,11,000 fled the country to take refuge in Uzbekistan. Osh has traditionally been part of the Ferghana valley (Uzbekistan) and Uzbeks, for centuries, enjoyed a prosperous livelihood in the area where they have now become a minority. Reeling under unemployment, corruption and the worst economic recession Kyrgyzstan now sustains itself on Russian and American economic/development aid. Under the autocratic rule of Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan has suffered poor governance. Stringent anti religious measures have given rise to Islamic fundamentalism and the government has failed to restructure its economy. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan though have attained political stability and recorded steady economic growth. The Kazak move to shift its capital from Almaty to Astana in the north is primarily to stamp its political authority on the region where the majority, ethnic Russians and Cossacks, has demanded secession or reunion with the Russian Federation.

Economic Potential and Geopolitical Over Lay

The independence of CARs focused international attention on the multitude of their natural resources, particularly petroleum, which under the Soviet blanket was not directly accessible. Managed sagaciously, this wealth will not only stabilize the beleaguered economies of these states but will also make them powerful players in international petroleum politics and world energy needs. Analysts and scholars have rightly observed that regional/super powers have little territorial ambitions in the area, but are centered more on ways and means to profitably exploit these resources. The geo - politics of this region is in essence concentrated around its economic potential. Kazakhstan has an estimated 7.8 billion⁵ tonnes of oil resources and natural gas pitted at 100 billion cubic feet. It is the second largest - Australia being the first - source of recoverable uranium estimated at 15 to 19% of the world's total reserves. In the next five years Kazakhstan is poised to emerge as the premier state for the supply of uranium. Uzbekistan has the

second largest reserves of oil among CARs and Turkmenistan, the third largest repository of natural gas in the world, estimated at 2.4 trillion cubic meters. The Caspian basin, as per estimates, has nearly 90-200 billion barrels of oil and about 46% of the world's natural gas. This constitutes almost the combined proven reserves of oil in Iran and Iraq.

Russia continues to maintain its political, economic and military influences in its 'near abroad'. Victory against Georgia and in the second Chechnya war has re-established its supremacy in the region. After the initial anti Russian indignation, these states, with their weak armed forces and fragile governments, have accepted that they would inevitably require Russian intervention to deal with any internal or external threat to their new found freedom. Cautious of the safety and security of its large populations residing in CARs, Russia has avoided interfering in the internal affairs of these countries for fear of antagonizing local population against ethnic Russians. In the aftermath of the disintegration of Soviet Union, USA had made desperate efforts to woo these nations and encouraged them to distance themselves from the Russian influence. CARs in return demanded an assured security cover against the aggressive Russian military designs in the north, growing threat from Islamic fundamentalists in the south and a powerful China with its 3400 kms of shared border with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the east. Owing to these very complexities, the Americans considered a military alliance with these republics untenable and instead offered economic aid, military assistance (equipment/training) and NATO's fringe benefits - North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC), Conference on Security Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and NATO's Partnership for Peace Programme. This honeymoon, too, was short lived as US master minded western democracy and pro American regimes in Georgia and Ukraine, which the CARs considered a threat to their totalitarian regimes and so, distanced themselves from the USA. The American military base at Karshi-Khanabad (Uzbekistan) was closed. Cash strapped Kyrgyzstan however continues to provide a 'Transit Centre'⁶ (earlier a military base) at Manas for lifting US and NATO supplies into Afghanistan at an annual rent of \$50 million (3 times the initial rent). Russian and China strongly opposed this deal and even offered economic help to dissuade Kyrgyzstan from allowing US a base at Manas.

China's first diplomatic initiative was to defuse tension along its border with CARs and withdraw a large chunk of its armed forces/militia deployed during the Soviet times. In Apr 1994 it signed a border agreement with Kazakhstan resolving an outstanding territorial dispute and pledged to peacefully settle other such

issues in the region. Second, peace and tranquility in the area is essential for China to ward off resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism in restive Xinjiang, inhabited by 16 million Uyghurs, having religious and ethnic affinity with the people of CA and demanding secession from China. Ethnic riots in the capital Urumqi in 2009, between Uyghurs and

Han Chinese, claimed 200 lives. On 01 August 2011, a deadly terrorist attack, executed by Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (trained in Pakistan) left 19 dead in Kashgar. Third, and most important, is to establish economic integration with CARs to meet its energy needs. China has already laid a crude oil pipeline from Kazakh Oil fields to Alashankou–Dushanzi. The land locked region has been provided all means of communication by China to access its market and further on, the sea route from the Pacific. Chinese goods have literally flooded the markets of this region. These republics, however, are wary of China's political ideology and its policies of expansionism. But geographical compulsions dictate friendly ties with their eastern neighbour – an emerging super power. Two powerful Islamic nations, Turkey and Iran in the south west laid historical, religious and cultural claims on CARs – a choice between 'Kemalism and Khomeinism'. Across the board these republics have adopted a moderate, tolerant face of Islam in consonance with their Sunni faith and Sufi traditions. However both Turkey and Iran are important to land locked CA for they provide access to the Mediterranean and Persian Gulf sea routes.

Specter of Af-Pak Region

CA is home to the fifth largest Muslim population in the world with its southern borders resting on Iran and a restive Afghanistan. The Af-Pak area infested by Islamic fundamentalists, terrorists and Taliban militia is in turmoil, casting far reaching political and security ramifications for the region. Having experienced the menace of Islamic fundamentalists in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Caucasus at their birth, the entire region is wary of the resurgence of these elements. In early nineties the CARs had rendered support to Northern Alliance to resist Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Subsequently in 2001, these republics provided military bases and logistic support to US to eliminate Taliban from Afghanistan. Revival of these extremist organizations and planned withdrawal of US and NATO forces in the face of uncertainty has caused perceptible worry amongst these republics. Further, leaving the fate of this volatile area to the fragile, corrupt and unpopular government of Hamid Karzai on one hand and an equally defunct government of Pakistan, which has played a dubious role in precipitating the crisis, on the other,

has further compounded their apprehensions. Under the circumstances, these republics neither have the political will nor the resources to contain Taliban surge in the region. Russia, with its hands full in the Caucasus, will not like to step into another quagmire – ‘war without end’. Pakistan, though new to the consciousness of CARs, made concerted efforts to woo these republics on religious and partly cultural affinity and attempted to discredit India. Backed by the sponsorship of

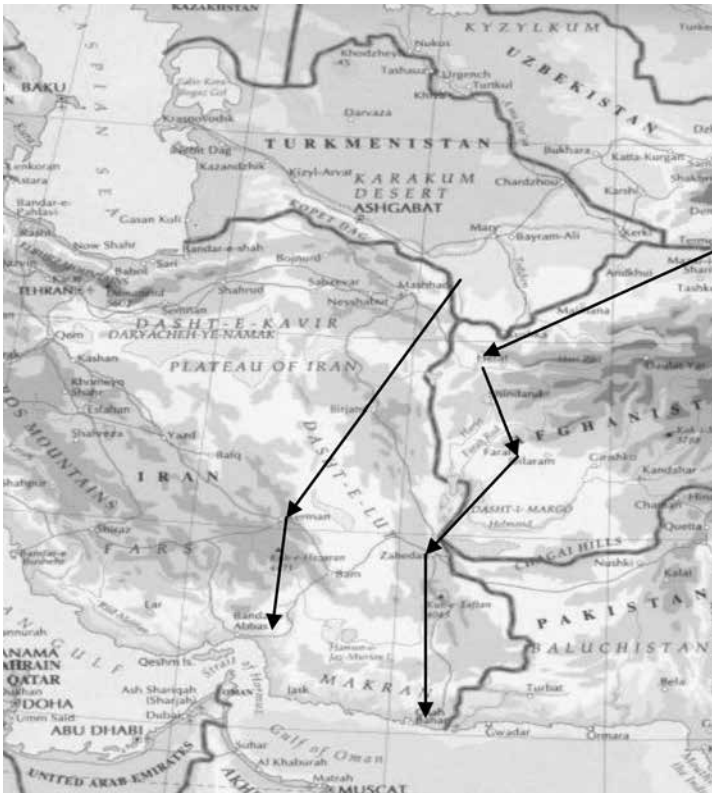
Pakistan and Iran, these republics have been admitted to the OIC (Organization of Islamic Countries), but recent events have made them conscious of Pakistan’s political and religious moves, particularly against India.

India and CARs

Historic and Cultural Ties. India enjoys a special place in the hearts of the people of Turkestan, reminiscing the historical and cultural ties between the two regions. They continue to romanticize our ancient ‘Silk Route’ connection and Emperor Babur’s ancestry from Andijan (Ferghana valley). Bairam Khan⁷, Akbar’s mentor, hailed from Turkmenistan and his son Rahim Khan was a ‘Navrattan’ in the royal court. Turkmen Gate in old Delhi is a symbol of those ties. Samarkand and Bukhara bear a marked architectural resemblance to our monuments of the Moghul period. Indo – Soviet friendship further cemented these ties and our films and melodies are part of their folklore. Ghalib’s literature enjoys a distinguished place in the elaborately laid out library at Tashkent. Girls are frequently christened Indira and Rita after the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the character Nargis played in ‘Shree 420’. Our leaders of the freedom struggle – Mahatama Gandhi and Pt Jawahar Lal Nehru – are revered. India’s democratic values and religious tolerance; founding four religions – Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism – and enfolded within its social fabric the two largest religions of the world – Christianity and Islam – are equally admired. Majority of India’s Muslim population (second largest in the world) believes in Sunni Islam, Sufism and Hanafi Islamic Jurisprudence distinctly common with the Muslim population of CA (except predominantly Shia Tajikistan).

Economic Ties. India has already taken major strides in economic integration with CARs yet there is vast scope for more. While CA has abundant resources, particularly hydro carbons and uranium, to substantially meet India’s energy requirements, they can equally benefit from India’s economic growth and technological advancements. Kazakhstan⁸ will supply 2000 tonnes of uranium to India by 2014. The deal has attained significance after Australia, a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, refused supply to India unless New Delhi signs the

NPT. In another Rs. 1800 crore deal, India's ONGC Videsh Ltd. has earned 25% stake in Satpayev oil fields in Kazakhstan. TAPI, the Turkmenistan⁹, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India pipeline being on the backburner, India and Turkmenistan are exploring alternative arrangements .With Islamabad denying India a land route to CA, President Islam Karimov¹⁰, in a significant move during his visit to New Delhi in May 2011, agreed to provide an alternate route right up to Tashkent. Both the alternatives i.e. Central Asia – Persian Gulf corridor (Sungan–Kerman–Bandar-e-Abbas) and Trans - Afghanistan corridor (Tashkent –Termez–Mazar-i-Sharif–Herat –Dilaram–Zahedan–ChahBahar) are being explored (Map 2). This will substantially reduce transportation costs and also help Afghanistan benefit from regional economic systems. In a series of agreements with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan India has offered co-operation in information technology, agriculture, pharmaceuticals, textiles, banking and a host of other fields. It needs



Map 2- Alternate Route (→)

no emphasis that Iran is vital for India's economic integration with CA and our historic relations with Tehran have gained added importance and must remain independent of our ties with USA. Further, India's economic integration with these republics will enhance its influence and provide leverage to enact a larger political and strategic role in the region.

Politico-Strategic Realm. CARs would like India with its strong economic growth status, largest democracy in the world and political clout within the international community, to play a larger role in the region as a counter balance to China. There is a convergence of views that terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism and resurgence of Taliban in the Af-Pak area have directly impacted the security of the region. India is already a member of Cooperation in Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) formed with the initiative of Kazakhstan and enjoys an observer's status, alongside Pakistan, at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This six member organization, with Russia and China being its members, holds not just the key to resource rich CA but also to the security situation in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal. Kazakhstan, a powerful member of SCO and now Beijing also support India's larger role¹¹ in the organization. India has helped Kazakhstan in its bid to enter WTO. Russia, a time tested ally will not, in any case, deny India a greater role. These republics also support India's permanent membership in the UN Security Council. Affirming its influence in the area, India has constructed and gifted an airfield at Ayni, 15 miles west of Dushanbe, at a cost of \$70 million, as a goodwill gesture. During the recent visit of India's Defence Minister Shri. AK Antony to Kyrgyzstan, New Delhi agreed to train Kyrgyz peace keeping forces and establish a joint military high altitude research centre at Bishkek. India had carried out a token exercise with Tajik forces and a large number of its officers are being trained in India. Due to commonality of equipment and shared security concerns there is a large scope for military to military cooperation with CARs in the field of trade of military hardware, maintenance of equipment, training of personnel and sharing of intelligence. USA, on many occasions, has impressed upon India to play a more assertive role in the Af – Pak region. This debate is gaining ground in view of the proposed withdrawal of US and NATO forces, leaving a large military space in this volatile region. Indian army's internal commitments in counter insurgency operations and management of the country's vast frontiers against two hostile nations do not permit India to step into this space. Instead India should be seen as part of a regional grouping – Iran, Russia, CARs and China- seeking a negotiated settlement of the Afghan crisis. India's main stake in CA is its economic security

and to that extent peace and stability in the region is a prerequisite. India has already committed \$1.5 billion in nation building in Afghanistan and has earned the goodwill of the people of this country and should not shy away from even opening a dialogue with the Taliban to bring them to the negotiating table. India should continue its developmental activities in Afghanistan and may undertake to train its armed forces and police.

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Notes

1. Alexander The Great by Paul Cartledge, Page 231.
2. Genghiz Khan and Making of the Modern World by Jack Weather Ford, Page 9 and 118.
3. Russia-India Report by Dr Rupak Jyoti Borah, fellow at the centre of International Studies, Univ. of Cambridge U.K. 2009, 05 May 2011.
4. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Kyrgyzstan – Country in Transition).
5. Economic Times, 15 Apr 2011, Indian Express 16 Apr 2011 and MOF, Feb 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in>.
6. Financial Times, 03 Feb 2009
7. Strategic Importance of Turkmenistan to India published in Strategic Analysis, vol35, 04Jun 2011.
8. Refer Note 5 above.
9. Refer Note 7 above.
10. Telegraph India – 18 May 2011, The Hindu 18 May 2011
11. As reported by TNN on 25 Jul 2011.