



China's Strategic Footprint in Central Asia as an Opportunity or Challenge for India: A Case Study of Taliban in Afghanistan.

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Abstract

India and China are the two biggest nations in the world and constitute largest economy and military power in Asia as well as in the globe. Both the countries have developed their diplomatic relations since their formation as political entities. They have concluded many agreements and summits for the promotion of bilateral relations in trade and security arrangements. The trade relation between them has been climbed to some height from its commencement but security aspect was lacked behind too much beyond the expectation. Both the countries have differences and confrontations on many grounds and issues, and are playing proxy war against each other on different platforms. Border conflict continues to poison the bilateral relations.

USA has withdrawn from the security arrangement of Afghanistan and Taliban has captured the political system of the said country in their barren hands. The regime change in the Eurasian land mass has brought both opportunities and challenges for the world powers especially for India and China. The Central Asians are mostly Muslim majority countries and share borders with China and Afghanistan directly and with India and Pakistan as extended neighbours. The Kashmir state in India having Muslim majority populations are very prone for the outfit groups to play their cards. In that context the geographical proximity of the Central Asia with terrorist affected countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan have security implications for themselves as well as for India also which are already suffering from terrorism and extremism. China can use the outfit groups with the help of Pakistan against India to play its hidden agenda or to circle India by its geo-strategic arrangement in the region. This paper will not only try to find out a scope for cooperation between India and china in security arrangement in central Asia but also will search for areas of same interests to bring them together on multiforms in South Asia.

Key words: Terror-politics nexus, hidden agenda, raw materials, outfit groups, security arrangement, Confrontation and Cooperation.

Introduction:

Central Asia is a new geopolitical creation which has an important strategic role to play in the coming years. It is in the middle of three super civilisations—the Islamic, the Christian and the Buddhist and is seen by many experts as one of the most vulnerable areas of instability between them. It can become a natural, historically formed buffer zone as well as form the hub of Islamic extremism. Being placed in the middle of the Eurasian Continent, it is also one of the most convenient routes of transit. It is rich in minerals, especially hydrocarbons. As a consumer market it still remains to be exploited. All these factors lead to increasing interest in CARs by various countries. Experts point out that in the 21st century, Central Asia will become an important region. India as an extended neighbour of CARs has major geostrategic and economic interests in this region. The future prospects for cooperation between Central Asia and India in the field of energy security seem to be very important. Peace and stability in CARs and Afghanistan seems to be the most crucial factor for India's security. There is already a realisation by the world powers of the danger posed by religious extremism and terrorism. Therefore India should take advantage of the situation and cooperate with other world powers to overcome this rising menace of religious extremism.

China is the only country in the region which shares borders with three of the Central Asian countries and has very close diplomatic, security and economic relations with the region. Its presence in the Eurasian countries manifests in every aspect of social, cultural and political lives of Central Asian people. The relations of any other country with Central Asia may be determined or influenced by China in the region in future. India which has historical relations with the region is not exception to this. Security, economy and diplomacy may be compromised with Chinese interests.

Central Asia is of great strategic importance to India. There is enormous scope for pragmatic and profitable engagement between the two. The focus of relationship between the Central Asian Republics (CARs) and India can be defined by the importance of Central Asia for peace and stability in our region. Despite India's current under-involvement in CARs; these countries offer great opportunities, which if availed would help in consolidating India's short and long-term foreign policy goals in this region.

Opportunities in Central Asia

Owing to excessive commodity prices, Central Asian countries' commercial performance has improved in recent decades. With various degrees of growth and purchasing power in each nation, the region's GDP totaled around USD 339 billion. In 2017, Kazakhstan was the wealthiest, with a per capita income of USD 11,580, while Uzbekistan was the poorest, with a per capita income of USD 2,150. Despite having plentiful natural resources such as petroleum, natural gas, antimony, aluminium, gold, silver, coal, and uranium that have yet to be utilised, the decline in energy and commodity prices, exacerbated by Western international sanctions, has had an effect on the economy of Nations. Uzbekistan, for example, is the world's 17th biggest natural gas

supplier, ninth greatest gold manufacturer, and 6th largest cotton producer. Their agricultural economy, which produces grain, cotton, beef, tobacco, wool, fruits, and plants, is also a major economic engine. As a result of its vast natural resources, Central Asia has enormous economic potential for both India and Central Asia.¹

Natural Resources: Oil & Gas, Hydrocarbon and Uranium

Gold, uranium, copper, zinc, iron, tungsten, and molybdenum are among the valuable and non-precious minerals found in Central Asia. With 8% of the world's iron ore, Kazakhstan is a real Eldorado mine. It also has the world's second-largest manganese reserves and the eighth-largest iron deposits, as well as roughly one-third of the world's chrome resources. Coal is no exception, as the area is the ninth greatest producer in the world. Kazakhstan has the most chromium and lead reserves in the CIS, ahead of Russia. Kazakhstan is second in manganese, nickel, silver, and zinc, and third in coal, gold, and tin.² Kazakhstan is also the world's second-largest uranium resource country, behind Australia, with between 16 and 19 percent of known worldwide deposits, or 1 to 1.5 million tonnes. In terms of harvest, it was third after Canada and Australia in 2007, but it intends to overtake Canada and Australia as the world's leading producer in the coming years. The extraction activities, which had halted in the 1990s, were restarted in the following decades, with 2,000 tonnes extracted in 2000, 8,500 tonnes in 2008, and over 13,000 tonnes in 2009. By 2020, the government hopes to harvest 15,000 to 30,000 tonnes.³

The apparent driving force for Kazakhstan's recovery is its oil exports. Kazakhstan is home to 1.8% of the world's total oil reserves. Kazakhstan's oil reserves are estimated to be 4.8 billion tonnes, or more than 35 billion barrels, according to experts. According to reports, the Kazakh part of the Caspian Sea might hold an additional 17 billion tonnes of oil, or 124.3 billion barrels. According to Kazakhstan's Ministry of Petroleum, oil output reached 81 million tonnes in 2017 and would progressively increase to 88 million tonnes by 2020. Kazakhstan is projected to stay among the top oil producers due to its oil and gas deposits.⁴

Central Asia had the undesirable position of being a source of raw materials, such that 80-90 percent of the raw materials that it produced, including raw cotton, fruits and vegetables, metals and minerals.⁵ The three Caspian republics of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan hold close to 50bn barrels (7bn tonnes) of crude oil, around 3.5% of the world's proven reserves. They also have some 12.5 trillion cubic metres (tcm) of gas, around 6.8% of world reserves.⁶

China and India's hunt for Energy in Central Asia

India has long been aware of the vast energy sources that exist in the Central Asian area, which may possibly meet India's energy needs. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the area in 2015 cleared the door for India to finally obtain a long-awaited energy stake in the region, however India's objectives in the region may still take several years to completely accomplish. Three recent landmark breakthroughs in the atomic and oil industries have paved the way for India's entrance into the Central Asian energy market. The most important lesson from the Prime Minister's journey is President Nursultan Nazarbayev's bold decision to sign a substantial deal for a restored long-term delivery of uranium to India. Second, when Prime Minister Modi started exploration and production drilling activities in the Satpayev region on July 7, 2015, India's ONGC-Videsh Ltd (OVL) made its maiden discovery. Third, the Ufa Summit and the Prime Minister's subsequent travel to Turkmenistan may have laid the groundwork for the TAPI pipeline to ultimately see the light of day. In the previous four months, there have been some really good developments on the TAPI project. The Prime Minister of Ashgabat termed the TAPI project a "essential pillar" and urged it to be completed "soon." "TAPI has the potential to revolutionize regional economic relations and create wealth along the route," he added. "I communicate our enthusiasm in long-term investment in Turkmenistan's energy industry."⁷

Challenges

Peace and security are the hallmark for countries socio-economic and political development. Since Central Asia is newly independent countries have very less experience of security arrangement and political development. The demographic structure and geopolitical location of the region are very prone to move towards terrorism and extremism, because the region is basically Muslim populated and surrounded by the countries and provinces which are already affected by terrorist activities.

Extremism of any kind, including religious and drug trafficking, is a major problem in Central Asia and neighbouring nations today. Terrorist actions are becoming more common in China, India, and Central Asia. Furthermore, with the growth of transnational, ideological, and social webs, it has taken a new path. These ties have posed a serious danger to regional and global peace and security. In their separate nations, the three concerned members are confronted with various forms of terrorism. In Jammu and Kashmir, for example, India faces cross-border terrorist operations, as does China in Xinjiang and Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are among the countries in the region.⁸

There are reports that two world reknown terrorists Jordanian-born Chechen field commander Khattab and Central Asian fellow-militant JumabaiNamaughani have decided that they will make an Islaic State in their respective countries. They aim to make such state with help of fundamentalist groups active in West Asia, Pakistan and Taliban.⁹ The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMS), that is funded by Alqaayeda and extremist

whabism to exploit and indoctrinate the Eurasian people. Government of Uzbekistan has last year has cleared to the International Media that some terrorist forces like IS were training the young mind of Uzbek and Tajik people. Recently, Uzbekistan has blamed the outfit groups operating in Pakistan to train a number of Central Asian people. The operating groups are Mezb-e-, and Islamic Ulema Society. These forces are reshaping the new generations according to their ideology and thoughts.¹⁰

Nexus between Terrorism and Politics and its Implication on India

Today there mounting security concerns in Central Asia over rising cross-border and state sponsored terrorism, religious extremism and ethnic unrest, flowing from Afghanistan and Pakistan due to the former presence of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda militants, and the Fergana valley due to Tajik Civil War. Terrorism is getting prominence in the form of new threats in China, India and Central Asia. It has achieved a new dimension with the formation of transnational ideological, financial, and technological networks. These linkages have made terrorism a potent source of destabilization, both regionally and globally. India is facing cross-border terrorism sponsored by Pakistan in J&K, China in Xinjiang and Central Asia in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.¹¹ Recently it was stated by Uzbekistan's foreign minister, Abdul Aziz Kamilov that fundamentalist Islamic organizations were training up to 400 young Uzbek and Tajik guerrillas at camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Uzbekistan has recently accused three Pakistani organizations -Mezb-E-Harkat-e-Jihad (MHJ), Devas-Ul-Ershad (DUE) and the Islamic Ulema Society (IUS) of surreptitiously training hundreds of Central Asians at various centres in Pakistan with the task of carrying out terrorist attacks and destabilizing the countries by overthrowing the governments and establishing their puppets.¹²

Clearly, Pakistan's Central Asia policy is operating at two levels, officially it has tried to follow the friendly policy, at the other level, ISI has been supporting infringing groups in Central Asia to win more leverage over these countries so that Pakistan can be able to install weak and friendly government in the region. Such a government will also provide Islamabad easy access and influence in the CARs.¹³ In addition to ISI's support, we can also see the involvement of other non-state actors such as extremist Islamic parties; Al-Qaeda, Taliban, the truck and transport smuggling mafias and drug traffickers who have close links with IMU and Taliban. This has resulted in an explosion of self-interest groups in Pakistan who have benefited from the Afghan Civil War and Islamic insurgencies in the CARs. Therefore, these groups are interested in weakening the state authority, which in turn enables their business interests and Islamic agenda to flourish. The cross-border terrorism in Central Asia will equally hurt the security and economic interests of both China and India.¹⁴

China:

The disruptive potential of Islamic extremism against the Uyghur in Xinjiang province of China is matter of great concern for Beijing. Given that the majority population of the region shares ethnic and cultural affinities with Central Asia. China finds it as a threat to its territorial unity. The Central Asian states not only provide "a readymade example and inspiration" of independence but also "have been accused of providing bases and other material support for various secessionist movements in Xinjiang. In fact, on this issue there is far greater congruence in Sino-Indian than Sino-Pak interest.¹⁵ In other words, in one aspect in which China and Pakistan differ from each other and India and China support each other is that Pakistan promoting terrorism and extremism in the region, for instance, Pakistan is interested in exporting Saudi Wahabism to encircle India with a pan Islamic arc. In this respect China and India share a common threat posed by terrorism and religious extremism for their territorial unity and integrity.¹⁶

India:

Security interest is placed most prominently in India's Central Asia policy. For Central Asia and India alike, the greatest security concern-the Kashmir question, indo-Pak relations, religious fundamentalism and terrorism-are closely interlinked. Hence India believes that security situation in Central Asia directly affects its own security. Meena Singh Roy, a senior researcher at India's Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis says, "India has vital interest in the security and political stability in Central Asia. Obviously given the Kashmir angle, India cannot be walled off from the political developments taken place in the region. Any advance by Islamic extremist groups in CARs could invigorate similar elements active in Kashmir. For reasons dictated by geography, India's strategic concerns are tied up with the regions bordering its north and northwest. Pakistan in its northwest continues to be antagonistic towards India. Pakistan is already sponsoring cross-border terrorism in Kashmir. Therefore, for India the geostrategic importance of CARs is immense. Under no circumstances India can ignores this region".¹⁷

So with the above discussion, it has been cleared that China and India are equally affected by terrorist and disruptive activities in Central Asia that situation left both the countries with no option except to a cooperative each other to safeguard their long term interests.

Cooperation and Coexistence:

The ability of China and India to cooperate and coexist in Central Asia would impact not only them but the entire region. It therefore, deserves consideration as to how both will accommodate each other's interest and simultaneously compete to safeguard their own priorities. But in fact, China and India will find themselves on the same side of the fence to combat terrorism or to arrest drug trafficking in Central Asia.¹⁸ The two Asian giants have broad common interests in Central Asia. Both nations have been seriously affected by terrorism and thus share interests when they come to anti-terrorist measures. As being neighbours of Central Asia, both the

countries aspire to maintain Central Asian stability. Both the nations recognize the importance of the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan for establishing security in the region, hoping they can find a permanent solution to the security problem in Central Asia.¹⁹ In fact, in this context, an area of common concern for Central Asia, India and China would be guard the region from becoming a fertile ground for the growth of Islamic extremism from neighbouring Afghanistan and Pakistan. Instability in the Af-Pak region and the possibility of the militants seeking havens in sympathetic Central Asian states are equally a threat to all.²⁰

Conclusion:

An uneasy or conflict-riven relationship between Beijing and New Delhi will create polarization among nations in the region and force them to choose one or the other. Meanwhile a Sino-Indian relationship based on cooperation and rivalry would provide opportunities to the Central Asian states to benefit from the development potential of both nations. It would be of great benefit to India and China as well as the region and beyond, if the two would help evolve a cooperative security framework in which the different regions of Asia meaningfully develop multifaceted and overlapping relations.

Technological and industrial cooperation among the EU countries was preceded and accompanied by a process of political integration that is unique in economic history today. The 'gentle commerce' between people so dear to Montesquieu and Adam Smith, today can help China and India to re-discover each other and to act together on specific issues of energy, stability and security of the region.

The cooperation between the said powers only will be achieved, when the functions of the common factors would depend not only on the bilateral relations of the regional states with India and China individually, but also the bilateral Sino-India relationship. For both countries, the possibilities of cooperation are shadowed by the threat of relative gain and suspicion that each country has with respect to the other. With the above discussion, it has been cleared that, China and India see each other as a potential threat and suspicion and every time they stood against each other on many issues. Only thing on which they have common concern is the security of their regions and their interests in Central Asia from outfit and fundamentalist groups. So they have to come out from dogmatic attitude and narrow thinking and support each other on common concern-specially security issues.

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