

---

## The New Power Game in Central Asia: Role of USA, China, and Russia

DILIP KUMAR MAURYA

Senior Research Fellow  
Department of Defence & Strategic Studies  
University of Allahabad, Allahabad  
India

### Abstract:

*The location of Central Asia in the middle of Islamic, Christian and Buddhist Civilizations accords it a prominent socio-cultural relevance in the contemporary world. It is not only the most convenient transit link for the socio-cultural transgression but also tends to make it one of the most vulnerable areas of instability between them. Economically, the Central Asian regions mineral resources are also the huge prospective market potential. It tend to make it a source of attraction for the both the developed and the developing countries. The author discusses the role of the USA, China and Russia in securing the region and working for sustainable development so that peace and security can prevail in the region.*

**Key words:** Anglo-Russia rivalry, terrorism, transnational threat, Organisations for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Silk Road Strategy Act, geo-political alignment, SCO, Near Abroad, Gazprom.

### INTRODUCTION:

Since the mid 1990's Central Asia has been viewed largely as a playground for competition for control of natural resources and influence among the states of Central Asia by the major powers

of the world. This subtle competition is often described as the new Great game for power and influence. It is reminiscent of the Anglo-Russian rivalry of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was termed as the Great Game by Rudyard Kipling. The only difference this is that even though there is one meta-power, the US, there are a large number of players against just Russia and Britain in the past. Besides, the Central Asian states, inspite of their many limitations, are making every attempt to fulfill their legitimate responsibilities as important actors. Each of the regional players are keen to seek power and influence s for the benefit of their own national interests. This scenario can be summarized as :

“Five new republics, predominantly Islamic but vibrantly distinct, are grouped around the Caspian Sea, the current landlords of the untapped oil and natural gas reserves that rival those in the Persian Gulf. Pipelines, tanker routes, petroleum consortiums, and contracts are the prizes of the New Great Game. India and China, each with exponentially growing energy needs, are vying for access, along with Russians, Europeans and Americans. Turkey, Iran and Pakistan have their political, economic and cultural interests in the former Soviet Republics where slumbering rivalries have abruptly awakened among Azeris, Armenians, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmens, and other long subject peoples....It is bloody muddle, made worse as before as before by outsiders.”<sup>1</sup>

## **USA:**

The leadership in USA understood the significance of Central Asia and the role it would play in the new world order long before the fateful day of September 11, 2001. The strategy was to focus on a policy of constant engagement to support these nascent countries integration with Western political-military institutions, provide and protect political stability, help them combat transnational threats, encourage and implements market oriented reforms and democratization and most

importantly ensure access to energy resources in the region. After the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the United States (US) recognised the independence of the Central Asian Republics and established full-fledged diplomatic relations. The US government also took the initiative to integrate these states into the international community by supporting their admissions and memberships to international organization like the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's Partnership for Peace (Pfp) programme, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and other international organizations. The passing of the "Freedom Support Act" on October 24, 1992, and the "Silk Road Strategy Act" in 1999, further strengthened the multi-faceted economic assistance provided to the Central Asian states by the US government.

It is widely presumed that Central Asia was hardly critical to America strategic priorities and economic interests before September 11, 2001. After 9/11, the US had a valid excuse to acquire bases in Central Asia for "Operation Enduring Freedom". The US intruded into the sphere of Russia's vital interests, and emerged as strategic power on the geo-political horizon of the Central Asian-Caspian region. As a result, its economic presence in the region has now been supplemented by its military presence. In this new geo-political alignment, the position of Moscow is subjected to a serious test and competition from Washington.

The US policies in Central Asia are in tune with its broader policy frame of maintaining global hegemony. While trying to occupy the power vacuum left by the Soviet disintegration, the US policies in post-Soviet Eurasian space are aimed to achieved five broader objectives.

- a) to enhance its military presence to gain control over the political and security environment.
- b) to establish governments friendly to the US;

- c) to create a conducive atmosphere for investment and trading
- d) to secure control over energy transit routes; and
- e) to undermine what the US policy-makers call Russia's "neo-imperialistic" aspirations.

The US interests are driven by the "search for energy sources that help in reducing American dependence on West Asia; the importance of creating fresh markets for American goods and services; and, finally the need to prevent the dominance of potential rivals, especially China and, to a lesser extent Russia."<sup>2</sup>

The five countries that emerged in Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union a decade ago are known to most Americans but are now being urgently counted as the US seeks to destroy terrorist bases in Afghanistan...With the exception of the Pentagon, which early on recognized that the Central Asian states might some day prove a valuable security asset, American and many other diplomats viewed them as dangerous places, and best avoided....The focus on military cooperation rather than promotion of democracy proved a success.<sup>3</sup>

## **CHINA:**

The Chinese leadership sees Central Asia as a critical new region where it can exert its power and influence and achieve its global to be recognized as a global power. The Central Asian states of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan share a common border with the North-Western state of Xinjiang in China. The state was formerly known as East Turkestan and has been under Chinese rule for the last 112 years. It has a population that is almost two-thirds Muslim and strongly influenced by the bordering CARs. After the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962, China and Pakistan formed an alliance which led to the construction of the Karakoram Highway from Xinjiang to Pakistan. This

highway has now become a strategic transportation artery which also been extended to the CARs. The Chinese diplomacy story in Central Asia during the last decade has been astounding success. Through SCO, China has made itself indispensable to the Central Asia region.

The diktats of the Chinese foreign policy in Central Asia is a part of a broad policy framework which intends to project China as a super power in Asia and reduce its vulnerability to the US power in a multipolar international order. The Chinese government has three broad policy goals which guide its strategy towards Central Asia.

- a) Provide security to the region and the secure its restive Xinjiang province.
- b) Gain unconditional access to the Central Asian regions natural resources.
- c) Be accepted as a regional power via SCO's political framework.

This is a part of China's overall Silk Road strategy to diversify energy dependence from the unstable Gulf region and build overland routes to hedge against maritime supply disruptions from the Gulf.

According to CNPC Research and Development Department Director Yan Xuchao, China's oil security faces several risks in the near terms: increased oil pricing as oil production extends to volatile regions and difficult terrain; transportation channel risk as traffic volume at the Malacca Straits nears full capacity with perceived threat of U.S. military deployment in the region; political risk as the oil sector is politicized in inter-state competitions.<sup>4</sup>

The events of September 11 and their aftermath changed the Chinese security calculus. In response to the shifting strategic landscape, China launched a concerted effort towards its neighbours. Before the attacks, China had viewed its strategic situation as gradually deepening and tensions

between America and China were receding. However, with the events following 9/11, and an expanded US presence in the immediate neighbourhood of China, Chinese security analysts had to reexamine their position.<sup>5</sup>

### **Russia:**

Even a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian states found it difficult to cut the umbilical cord that bound them with Russia.

As US is trying to establish itself in the Central Asian Region, Russia has boldly asserted its position in what is called its “traditional sphere of influence”. The focus on Central Asia is shaped by its threat assessment which saw Central Asia emerge as a significant factor of Russia’s economic and security future. Its policy in Central Asia is reflective of its objective of maintaining its status as a leading regional power in the Eurasian space. By effectively using multilateral structures and making concerted efforts in developing its bilateral relations. Russia is trying to implicitly secure its position in the “Near Abroad”.

Russia is proactively promoting CIS Raid Reaction Force, under the frame work of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) in order to secure its political and military interests in the Central Asian region. Russia is also consolidating its place in the energy sector. Russian oil gas companies are being promoted to obtain maximum stakes in the Caspian energy sector. Gazprom, the Russian gas company has monopolized the export of Central Asian gas, especially with the agreements it reached with Turkmenistan in April 2003. This deal has been termed as the “deal of the century” and allows Gazprom to transit most of the Turkmen gas till 2008. This deal can also eliminate the gas pipeline project from Turkmenistan to Turkey via Azerbaijan and Georgia. In May, 2003, Gazprom achieved a major agreement with Kyrgyzstan

and Tajikistan for supplying gas. In addition, Gazprom started upgrading the transport infrastructure to unify Central Asian and Russian gas export systems in order to control all gas exports from Central Asia. These initiatives by Russia had increased Europe's dependence on Russian gas.

## **CONCLUSION:**

In the last decade the world has started taking more notice of Central Asia. For the United States and its allies, the region is a valuable supply hub for the Afghanistan war effort. For Russia, it is an arena in which to exert political influence. For China, it is a source of energy and a critical partner for stabilizing and developing the restive Xinjiang province in the Middle kingdom's west. Some commentators have referred to Washington, Moscow, and Beijing's renewed activity in the region as a modern iteration of the Great Game. But unlike the British and Russian empires in their era of competition and conquest, the Central Asian governments are working to use renewed external involvement to their sovereign advantage, fending off disruptive demands and reinforcing their political control at home. Accordingly, the Central Asian case today is not a throwback to the past but a guide to what is to come the rise of new players and the decline of Western influence in a multipolar world.

The first lesson to take from China, Russia, and the United States' involvement in Central Asia is that it has strengthened the hand of rulers, who have been able to play the suitors off one another to extract economic benefits and political support where possible. The second lesson is that regional multipolarity has eroded Western economic influence. Over the last decades, China has emerged as the leading economic power in Central Asia. Chinese assistance there, as in Africa and other developing regions, is not easy to categorized; it is usually a hybrid of foreign aid, investment, and emergence standby

loans. Beijing has skillfully relied on a unique mix of these economic instruments with each of its Central Asian neighbours. The third lesson is that Central Asia elites have grown increasingly hostile to the West's values agenda-promoting democracy and human rights – and are now able to push back against criticism. The war on terrorism gave these regimes cover to build up their security services and clamp down on opposition. China, Russia, and the United States colluded with Central Asian security services to render terrorist suspects, without due to process hearings, to and from the region. The United States claimed that the war on terrorism could not be constrained by international law. Russia and China embedded their extraterritorial actions in new regional legal frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Anti-Terrorism Treaty.

## **REFERENCES:**

- 1) K.Meyers & S. Brysac: *Tournament of Shadows, The Great Game and Race for Empire in Asia* (London Abacus Books 2001) p.85.
- 2) Ahmad Rashid: *Taliban, Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (London 2002) p.163.
- 3) *The New York Times* 10 Oct, 2001.
- 4) *China Brief* 31 January, 2008.
- 5) Anita Sengupt: *Towards Constructive Strategic Partnership, Russia & China in Central Asia*, p. 147.