

Great Games and Competing Interests of Regional and Extra-regional Players

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Abstract

This paper is aimed to explore the question of how the Great Games poses different socio economic, political and security challenges to regional countries especially Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan. As Afghanistan is bordered with Central Asia which is the chessboard of big power since 19th century due to its position of huge amount of natural resources and strategic location. Different proxy wars in region especially in Afghanistan by regional and extra regional countries to project their strategic interests, which changed the dynamics of the social, economic and political stability of regional countries. This power politics in the region created a lot of internal and external challenges for Today's financial stalemate of the region, political instability, ethnic diversification, disunity, religious extremism, terrorism, worst law and order situation and lack of power sharing are the results of great games and competing interests of regional and extra regional powers in the region. The involvement of US, NATO and ISAF and their influx of billions of dollars in the form of aid has significantly improved Afghanistan's economic circumstances but the social, political and security situation remain the same.

Key words: Great Game, US, Russia, China and Central Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the great game relates to the strategic rivalry between British India and the Russian Empire that lasted thru the 19th century, as both states fought hard to vied influence over Central Asia. East India Company was one of the regional powers which spread British involvement at the start. Yet on the other hand Russia, the Asian kingdoms and Khanates were geographically isolated miles away. Only the buffer zone of Afghanistan, which closely created the 16km Wahan corridor between the two opponents, isolated the two empires. The great game started in 1830 when Lord Elen Borough challenged Bukhara's emirate with the goal of setting up new trading routes for Lord Wiliam Benttinck.¹ The Britishers were worried about Russians having an eye on their empire and trying to establish herself in the area by imperialist approach. In order to materialize their strategic interest, they wanted to preserve their foot holds in the region.² On the other side, Russia dreaded about the military and commercial invasions into Central Asia by Great Britain.³ All empires continually posted a theatre of fighting as a situation of mistrust. Throughout much of the time span, the general assessment was that this would result in war between Russia and Britain, but after a set of events that lasted a century, there was intense rivalry not fought directly. UK sought its supremacy in Afghanistan's matters with the aim of transforming it into the British protectorate. They also tried to protect their significant maritime trade route from the acquisition of a port on the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf by Tsarist Russia. While Afghanistan was announced neutral by the Russians. Finally, a number of failed conflicts broke out, including two Anglo-Afghan wars and two Anglo-Sikh wars.⁴ These have

¹ Barfield, T. (2012). *Afghanistan: A cultural and political History*. Princeton studies in Muslim Politics. p.32.

² Deutsch, F. (1980). Great Game in Asia. *Foreign Affairs* 58(4): 936-951.

³ Edwards, R. (2009). *The Winter War: Russia's Invasion of Finland, 1939-1940*. Pegasus Books.

⁴ Kohn, G. C. (2013). *Dictionary of wars*. Routledge.

actually lost their influence over many Khanates, including Bukhara, by UK's reliving Russians.⁵

The Outbreak of Great Game

Russian movements to the south and its instability and involvement in the region forced UK to think about its approach towards Central Asia. They eventually switched to the Bentinck in 1835 with Lord Auckland as India's new Governor General. The predecessor, like him, followed the anti-intervention approach on an ongoing basis.⁶ Moreover, Auckland was advised to monitor closely the new changes and events in Afghanistan and to react to Russia's impact.

Likewise, she had also the intention to stop the spread of Russian domination and the impending infringements of the influential political, diplomatic and economic policies in the region for her interests. It was reported in 1838 that Russia was prepared to declare war on Khiva.⁷ In contrast to this, Persia also attempted to annex Herat, the territories initially lost in the Russian-Persian War of (1826-28).⁸ For the UK Empire, therefore, it was too important to Herat to stay intact with the Kabul because it was essential for British India's strategic goal to ensure Kabul's allegiance. It was an 8-month military development from the Persian.⁹

First Anglo Afghan War

1st Anglo-Afghan war is the misstep remembered in the UK archives as a "mishap in Afghanistan".¹⁰ It was a war between East India Company and Afghanistan's Emirate that lasted from 1839 to 1842. By having received Russian delegations, the distrust and danger posed by the Amir Dost Muhammad led UK to think of a substitute to the throne As Russia gradually increased its sphere to Central Asia,

⁵ Pierce, R. A. (1960). *Russian Central Asia, 1867-1917: a study in colonial rule* (Vol. 4). Univ of California Press.

⁶ Hitz, F. P., & Weiss, B. J. (2004). Helping the CIA and FBI Connect the Dots in the War on Terror. *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter*, 17(1), 1-41.

⁷ Kirakosian, A. D. (2003). *British diplomacy and the Armenian question: from the 1830s to 1914*. Gomidas Institute.

⁸ Cooley, A. (2012). *Great games, local rules: The new power contest in central Asia*. Oxford University Press.

⁹ Kreyenbroek, P. G. (2005). *The Kurds*. Routledge. (pp. 62-73)

¹⁰ Morrison, A. (2014). Introduction: Killing the Cotton Canard and getting rid of the Great Game: rewriting the Russian conquest of Central Asia, 1814–1895.

and this was trusted to pose a potential threat to British India. The East India Company's primary goal was to expand its area of influence to Afghanistan and eventually to create a buffer zone between Russia and British India.¹¹ To this end, they tried to set up a system that could suit their vital interest best. Therefore, at first, Dost Muhammad was effectively replaced by Shujja Shah.

Second Anglo Afghan war and Anglo-Russia Agreements

After the end of stress between Russia and UK in 1878, then Russia started interfered in Central Asia's affair. They decided to send diplomatic mission to the Kabul, even if the Ammir of Kabul's Sherr Ali Khan tried his best to hold them out of the city, but in July 1878 they arrived. The British also began to exert influence in Kabul in reaction to this advancement and demanded that Sherr Ali also accept an UK mission. But Kabul's Ammir frightened that he would return it if he sent it to Afghanistan to the Emirates.¹²⁻¹³. Eventually, under the control of Nevile Bowlles Chamberrlain, Lord Lyton set up a diplomatic mission, but that hardly entered the southern gateway of Khyber Pass that broken out in the second Anglo-Afghan war.

In May 1879, King Muhamad Yaqub Khan and British India ratified the Gandamak Treaty. In this treaty, Afghanistan's leader surrendered to British India and some border areas whereas retaining control over the rest of Kabul. Many historians see this treaty as the main cause for the 2nd Anglo-Afghan war.¹⁴ Likewise, after Merrv's invasion in 1884, Russian troops occupied the Geok Tepe. Both of these areas are strategically important for the regional control and its business activity. It was an alarm bell to British India as the Russian troops threatening Hearat. The two states eventually created an Afghan border commission to clearly define the border between the Russian Empire and Northern Afghanistan.¹⁵ Russian also captured

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Mihalka, M. (2007). Not much of a Game: Security Dynamics in Central Asia. *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 5(2), 21-39

¹³ Fatima, Q., & Zafar, S. (2014). New Great Game: Players, Interests, Strategies and Central Asia. *South Asian Studies*, 29(2), 627-655.

¹⁴ Khan, A. H. (2006). Central Asia: Centre of New Great Game. *The Dialogue*, 1(4): 57-82.

¹⁵ Rubin, B. R. (2006). Peace Building and State-Building in Afghanistan: constructing sovereignty for whose security? *Third World Quarterly*, 27(1), 175-185.

the area of Panjdeh North of the province of Herat and its castle in 1885. The Russian considered the District was part of the Khiva and Merv Whereas the Afghan claimed on the contrary that the individuals of the district of Panjdeh were always paying tributaries to the Afghanistan Emirates. The border committee had yet to make a decision that war had happened prior to its arrival. The Afghan forces were unable to beat the overwhelming number of the Russian forces. Afghanistan wanted British troops to enter and try to secure their lost land under the Gandamak treaty.¹⁶

Anglo-Russian Entente

The Anglo-Russian Convention on Afghanistan, Tibet and Persia was signed in 1907. Through defining their distinct influence in Persia, Afghanistan and Tibet, the convention took a tense relation between the UK and Russian empires to normalization. It defined the zone of influence which stipulates that none should intervene in Tibet and accept British presence in Afghanistan.

The Strategic Shift in Great Game

Several Western think tanks used the term after the fall of the USSR in the late nineties. The New Great Game to demonstrate what they have suggested in Central Asia as a revived strategic interest. Rather, it was the area's mineral resources and oil and gas reservoirs that became important to the interests of the states involved in the power politics. In 2004, one of the German journalists Lutz Kleveman wrote a book in which he associated this concept with Central Asia's discovery of mineral resources.¹⁷ One of the other famous writer Eric Wailberg is of the opinion that the major powers are still striving hard to develop their control on this area in order to gain access to the mineral and oil pipeline paths of the region. The phenomena of new great game explain that Central Asian states are reactive pawns in the hands of large states that interfere in Central Asia to accomplish their political objectives. Diversifying the political, economic and security relations between Central Asian states leads them to

¹⁶ Goodson, L. P. (2011). *Afghanistan's endless war: State failure, regional politics, and the rise of the Taliban*. University of Washington Press.

¹⁷ Edwards, R. (2009). *The Winter War: Russia's Invasion of Finland, 1939-1940*. Pegasus Books.

conclude that Russia is less hostile than before. Simply, the new great game is the conceptual model of the region's contemporary geopolitics as a struggle for control, energy, supremacy and benefits between local and global big powers.

Geo Strategic Importance of the Central Asia

Central Asian's significance is no longer a hidden truth to the globe as a whole. In terms of the corridor between three continents, its geo-strategic importance is quite strong. Since ancient times, the role of the Caspian basin and the Central Asian republics as a crossroads between East and West has been recognized.¹⁸ It has served for long time as a centre of commercial activity targeted at gaining access to the western market that links Beijing with the Mediterranean. This corridor served as the caravan's trading route to operate its business operations via roads popularly known as the Silk Road. The significance of this area in its foreign policy goals cannot be overlooked above and beyond the major powers. Central Asia has plenty of pressed and untapped energy supplies that are much greater than the Middle East to reach the global energy needs. It is the best alternative for fulfilling the need for big energy users like Russia, China and the United States.

It becomes essential for these republics to fulfill protectionist measures in the wake of new great game mainly aimed at enhancing social and political structures to protect their economies.¹⁹ Trade in the area has increased to secure economic cooperation in order to achieve broader benefits.

Again, due to geo-strategic and economic importance after the disintegration of Tsarist Russia, the new great game began in the energy-rich Central Asian region and that goes on. Russia, and the United States as well as some other regional and extra regional players are involved in exploiting this region's strategic and socio-economic worth to their own interests.²⁰ Although the viewer can no longer be the antagonists of the global stage, the tiny branch now

¹⁸Bahgat, G. (2006). Europe's energy security: challenges and opportunities. *International affairs*, 82(5), 961-975.

¹⁹ Torbakov, I. (2007). The West, Russia, and China in Central Asia: What kind of game is being played in the region? *Transition Studies Review*, 14(1), 152-162.

²⁰Bahgat, G. (2006). Europe's energy security: challenges and opportunities. *International affairs*, 82(5), 961-975.

deliberately decides who'll get what, how, where and how in this area's geopolitics.

The Caspian Sea oil and gas Reserve

The Caspian Basin is the main strategic target for all players that intervene in Central Asia's Caspian zone. Such oil and gas reserves can serve an enormous part in the power-crazy states energy and economic dominance in global politics. The global power aims to manage these energy reserves to exploit. The search for Caspian energy supplies arose in Central Asia after the breakup of the USSR, which escalated with the player's growing interest in it. The first oil exploration contract was signed in 1993 between the American company Chevron and the Kazakh regime. Since then, the US has been constantly interested in gaining influence in the Caspian Sea's three key shore-owning countries.²¹ The manipulation of this oil would help the global oil market stabilize. At least 115 billion barrels of oil have been included in the confirmed Caspian Sea oil reserves so far. In Kashagan and Tengiz, Kazakhstan has huge unexploited oil fields. It included the oppression of Kazakhstan's Tengiz oil field.

The expanse of oil and gas reserves in this area creates a geo-strategic and geo-economic competition to influence energy resources in Central Asia.²² These land lock countries are highly dependent on Russia to do their trade and business activities. Russia has a strong interest in exploiting unexploited natural resources in this region to maintain its supremacy in global affairs.

Dynamics of the new great game

The new great game has three main dynamics.

- **Geo-Political**

This element includes central Asian states role and commitment and their position in world politics. It concerns mainly the relationship between these states and great powers. Two things are important in the new great game which includes this area's natural resources and geography.

²¹ Ibid

²² Torbakov, I. (2007). The West, Russia, and China in Central Asia: What kind of game is being played in the region? *Transition Studies Review*, 14(1), 152-162.

- **Geo- Strategic**

Geo strategic element discusses the state's security interest and policies in the Central Asian region. This region is important in world politics due to its border with China and Russia therefore the containment of both countries is easy from Central Asia as well as this region is important due to potential hub of oil and gas pipelines.

- **Geo-Economic**

This region mainly matters in international politics due to its huge amount of natural resources including oil, gas, coal and other mineral resources. The geo-economic aspect of the great new game holds the will of the actors involved in controlling Central Asia's energy resources and monopolizing gas pipeline transport for long term use.²³

Interest of the Regional and Extra-regional Powers

- **Russia**

Russia is a significant regional power that requires hegemony in its surroundings and a strong hold and control. Russia is able to manipulate the scenarios in Central Asia by being broader enough along with its specific geography. In order to contain increasing American influence, Russia is entered into an agreement with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to build a new gas pipeline to create its own monopolies in the transportation of the gas pipeline to Europe. This general opinion on a piece of paper specifies the revision to Europe and Central Asia of the old gas and oil pipe lines that also induced Uzbekistan.

While this pipeline is in direct contrast to the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline which is ostensibly funded by the West to be built in the bottom of the Caspian Sea between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan say that they would better adopt the route that would make their oil and gas exports cheaper and easier. The pipeline would go to Europe via Russia's eastern shore of the Caspian Sea. With regard to Geo financial and geostrategic benefits, Turkmenistan is quite important for the great powers.

The state that would preserve reserve hegemony by coercion, compromises, and supremacy over these states transport infrastructure will benefit the tremendous influence in world politics.

²³ Klare, M. (2002). Global petro-politics: the foreign policy implications of the Bush administration's energy plan. *Current History* 13(4): 99-104.

Russia actually has full control on Turkmenistan's gas exports, and any foreign intervention in this area is objected to Russia. A 16 member countries platform have been formally established to preserve their monopoly on gas exports to Europe through Russia.²⁴ Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan also have to be members of this platform for gas exports. In January 2009, the twenty-day war between Russia and Ukraine over Ukraine's refusing to pay high gas market rates led to the collapse of the gas pipeline to Ukraine. This event had a major impact on Southern and Eastern Europe as some European countries are totally dependent on Russia. Quite simply, monopolizing the production of gas and oil pipelines not only from within Russia, but also from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan is the objective of Russia's foreign policy in Central Asia. Russia is also successful in achieving some strategic gain in Kyrgyzstan by setting up an airbase in 2009. Russia has provided Kyrgyzstan huge financial support, contributing to the closing of the Manama air base run by the U.S. for strategic airlift and logistical support to the U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

In Malashenko 2013's opinion, several of Russia's main objectives are:²⁵

- A) To combat the growth of Islamic extremism and eradicate it.
- B) Continue to monitor the increasing influence and dominance of America in the world.
- (C) Help for the authoritarian political system that best serves Russia's interest in the area.
- D) There is an abundance of energy sources in this area that enhance their significance to the major powers. For strategic purposes, Russia needs to secure its supremacy over the gas pipelines and get maximum benefits from regional connectivity.
- E) Protecting Russian minority groups in these Central Asian countries.

- **China**

China is one of the world's fastest growing economies need stable energy supply to maintain her economic growth. The nation's energy

²⁴ Trenin, D. (2009). Russia's spheres of interest, not influence. *The Washington Quarterly*, 32(4), 3-22.

²⁵ Malashenko, A. (2013). *The fight for influence: Russia in Central Asia*. Brookings Institution Press.

demand is increasing day by day.²⁶ Meeting gas and oil consumption requirement inside China is an ongoing attempt to manipulate Central Asian states resources. China wants to create multilateral ties with Central Asian states to invest in energy trade and transport. Beijing also plays a significant role in Shanghai cooperation organization for this reason. In addition to the economic growth of the border line regions, lasting peace and stable Central Asian states are also in China. Confinement of Islamic radicalization in Xingjian is China's core value that has a direct connection with turmoil. China is strongly promoting military and economic collaboration with Beijing tries to combat US power politics in Central Asia's and undermine the old idea of Central Asia as an exclusive possession of Russia.

The Chinese goals are as follows in Central Asia.

A) China's rising economic interest in exploiting Kazakhstan's natural resources to its country's best interests.

B) The security issues posed by turmoil in the Xingjian area are linked with the terrorist groups operating from Central Asia.

C) Finding a new market for the Chinese goods, as the Central Asian states may be more lucrative for China to export its goods to the Caucasus zone.

- **United States**

The disintegration of the USSR and the resulting change in the balance of power, the U.S. pursued its interests in Central Asia. To this end, the U.S. continued to work to expel former Soviet republic from the Russia sphere and to abolish communist ideology in this area. Liberal political and economic changes have been implemented to turn central Asian states from socialist to market-based economies.²⁷ The decommissioning of the Soviet military arsenal and the closure of Moscow air bases in Central Asia was also key to the interest of the United States. In order to combat Russian interference tactics, the US political and military presence in this area grew wider, particularly after 9/11. Bush's government agreed a bilateral tie with the Central Asian Republics. to start a war on terror and overthrow a Taliban dictatorship in Afghanistan. America created its Karshi Khanabad military air base in Uzbekistan and Manas air base in the

²⁶Bahgat, G. (2006). Europe's energy security: challenges and opportunities. *International affairs*, 82(5), 961-975.

²⁷ Rumer, B. Z. (1993). The gathering storm in Central Asia. *Orbis*, 37(1), 89-105.

Kyrgyz Republic. In addition, Tajikistan's airport was secured for temporary use at Dushanbe in order to maintain its logistical support to American troops in Afghanistan.²⁸

Moreover, the U.S. has tried to initiate a democratization program to reform the oppressive set-up in these countries, but was soon considered a threat to create U.S. dominance and hegemony in the area which led to conditional collaboration between Russia and China through SCO.²⁹

The following key concern in Central Asia is actively pursued by the U.S.

- A) Promoting Western democracy in Central Asia.
- B) Contain the influence of the China in the region.
- C) The elimination of Islamic extremism and terrorist activity
- D) Stop the control of Russia and finding alternative transit routes for gas pipe lines to Europe in order to establish its monopoly.
- E) Build possibilities for these countries to enter the global market outside of Central Asia.

Strategic Interests of Small Powers

• **Pakistan**

Pakistan's involvement in the Central Asian region arose from economic, geo-strategic and political benefits. Trade ties with these Central Asian land lock states could be the only answer to the economic issue facing Pakistan.³⁰ Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Indian (TAPI) gas pipe line, will meet its long-term energy requirements. Kyrgyzstan's hydroelectric potential can meet the electricity demand of Pakistan. In short, trade relations with this area could probably benefit Pakistan's external trade.

Pakistan key Foreign Policy Objectives are the following;

- Securing a good position in the Trade market.
- Improve its relationship with Central Asian countries.
- Because of its geo-strategic location in the world, Pakistan wants to profit from trading routes between Central Asia and

²⁸ Wishnick, E. (2004). *Strategic consequences of the Iraq War: US security interests in Central Asia reassessed*. Army War College Strategic Studies Inst Carlisle Barracks Pa.

²⁹ Ingram, R. M., & Barr, A. (1979). Changes in refraction between the ages of 1 and 3 1/2 years. *British Journal of Ophthalmology*, 63(5), 339-342.

³⁰ Din, S. U. (1997). The new great game in Central Asia. *International Studies*, 34(3), 329-341.

South Asia. As Central Asian is land lock region therefore their trade through Gawadar port will be very beneficial for Pakistan

- **Iran**

Iran is also one of the main players in great game. The disintegration of USSR offered Iran the good chance not only to leverage its cultural affinity, but also to use its geo-strategic position to manipulate this region's dynamics. Iran has enormous economic potentials and supply links to the Indian sea routes, to pursue the regional trade and energy security. Iran also wants Promoting cultural connections with Central Asian countries. Peace and prosperity over and regional stability are in Iran's best interests. Iran's increasing connections with Turkmenistan as the majority of the country's population are Shia.

- **India**

India also started to grow as a major player to exploit the region's natural resources. The increasing need for Indian energy and the potential energy resource are not the only motivation in the region for India. To this end, the establishment of proxies against its competitor remained effective. India's main interest is to grow and inter-regional transport infrastructure and to build economic links with this region. As a traditional rival India seeks to outdo Pakistan from this region and undermine her interests by fighting proxy war against Pakistan. Recent Indian involvement in improving the Iranian port of Chahbahar is an attempt to advance her financial interests³¹. The US also retains its own interest in India's thriving economic and political position in Central Asia to counter China and Russia.

CONCLUSION

In 19th century due to power politics of regional dominance between tsarist Russia and British Indian and in late 20th and in the start of 21st century among different regional and extra-regional powers primarily Russia and US, the great game for the exploitation of Central Asian natural resources and its geo-strategic position posed a lot of challenges and severely effecting the regional countries mainly Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan. It has gave birth to terrorism, wars, proxy war, militancy, fundamentalism, dictatorships,

³¹ Ibid.

political instability and economic crisis. A feasible alternative for regional countries to come out from this chronic disaster, is to follow non-alignment policy, compel foreign forces to quit, fight terrorist organizations and poverty collectively by themselves, and last but not least give utmost importance for their education and technological advancement in order to get rid from dependency over big power.