

Changing Geopolitical Dynamics in Central Asia: Causes and Effects

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Abstract

This study attempts to identify geopolitical competition and capacities of the US, Russia and China in Central Asia. The aim of this research is to assess whether the engagement of great powers in Central Asia is identical to the old Great Game. An interesting tug-of-war has been going on, in which the Central Asian Republics (CARs) are offering space to their patrons. The great powers have promised to promote stability in this region as deteriorating security in adjacent Afghanistan could have a domino effect on the regional and global security. Central Asia, after 25 years of independence, is still seeking partners to improve its security. The great powers are aware of the geopolitical and geo-economic importance of this region and focusing on fostering ties with the CARs by promoting regionalism. This paper seeks to offer an overview of the new emerging regional dynamics in Central Asia and dealing of the CARs (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) with the great powers.

Keywords: Central Asia, Great Game, Geopolitics, Heartland.

Introduction

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, new opportunities, as well as challenges, appeared for the post-Soviet states. The newly-emerged CARs received instant recognition but in their quest for good friends, they faced several challenges like security issues, political problems and economic stagnation, limiting their freedom of action. Besides, due to the lack of skills, most of these republics were lacking in pursuing cooperation and interaction with other states. It was very difficult for the CARs to establish durable economic and political links with other countries because of the absence of learned diplomats. Notably, their

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foreign relations were handled by Moscow since the leaders of the CARs have relied on Russia to maintain the authoritarian political system.¹ This made them dependent on Russia but they continued to search for a more powerful state to help them resolve their issues.

Security experts have raised the issue of peace and stability in Central Asia. Some considered that the CARs will be the part of Russia again, whereas, others are of the view that these states will survive independently by following the Turkish Model.² It was also projected that political developments in Central Asia are not possible without following traditional Islam as “Islam is growing more rapidly in the CARs than anywhere else in the world.”³ Hence, fears of the spread of fundamentalism, particularly after the situation in Afghanistan have made Russia, China and the US more apprehensive.

A complex situation began to emerge due to the increased instability in Central Asia, which has invited major powers to exert their influence. Drug trafficking, arms trade, militancy and interstate troubles have increased the involvement of major powers in the Central Asia regional politics. Three big powers, Russia, China and the US have also made strategies to control rich natural resources under the umbrella of mitigating the threat of terrorism and “each claim vital interest in the region.”⁴ Internal vulnerabilities, including economic stagnation of the CARs, gave advantages to these three powers in pursuing their interests in the region. Indeed, geographical factors always limit actions of the CARs, as its landlocked territory became an obstacle to their economic growth and political functioning. Political leadership of the CARs eventually realised that they need geopolitical schemes to convert their challenges into opportunities.

It appeared that despite their differing strategic goals, Beijing, Moscow and Washington have agreed to promote political stability in

¹ Niklas Swanstrom, “Central Asia and Russian Relations: Breaking out of the Russian Orbit?,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* XIX, no.1 (Fall 2012): 104.

² Mustafa Aydin, *Turkey's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century: A Changing Role in World Politics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 139.

³ Larry P Goodson, *Afghanistan's Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics and the Rise of Taliban* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 135.

⁴ Gregory O Hall, *Authority, Ascendancy, and Supremacy: China, Russia, and the United States, Pursuit of Relevance and Power* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 131.

Central Asia.⁵ They are equally important for the CARs, with some advantages and disadvantages and furthering complexity. Thus, this study revolves around the fundamental question: how do the CARs maintain a balance in their foreign policies towards Russia, China and the US? Moreover, what effects do these geopolitical rivalries have over their domestic policies?

Conventional relations of the CARs cannot be analysed without looking through the prism of geopolitics. This study is an effort to demonstrate the application of the geopolitical mode as a theoretical base to understand power politics of key international players in Central Asia. It is an attempt to highlight the links of the pursuit of influence by great powers and geography. Very few scholars are taking geopolitics as an explanatory tool as it is largely considered as a military security strategy. The paper does not attempt to diminish other theories to geopolitics, instead, it endeavours to visualise geopolitics as a mandatory tool to understand foreign policies of the CARs.

Theoretical Framework

The global politics has never been as complicated and diverse as it is in the current times. The global trends are shaped by the market economy and geographical positions. Thus, geopolitics and geo-economics are growing in harmonious manners. The wisdom to include geography in the formulation of foreign policy persists throughout the century. It has been widely observed that the innate struggles of humanity are not about ideas but about control over territory. However, ideology has always remained a predominant cause of protracted conflicts in the world.

In the early 20th century, political philosophers started to highlight the importance of geography in politics. Halford Mackinder has explained that geography has an extensive influence on politics. In general terms, geopolitics is the study of the impact of geographical factors on political (national and international) actions of any state and it is associated with *realpolitik*⁶ (a system of politics or principles based on practical rather than

⁵ Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Context in Central Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 116.

⁶ Definition of “Realpolitik,” www.en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/realpolitik.

moral or ideological considerations) and Grand Strategy.⁷ The subject of geopolitics has evolved in an environment where imperialist powers were trying to legitimise their colonial expansion. The matter of fact is that geopolitics is no more popular (as it was in history) due to the fast-growing technological innovations. However, the understanding of the importance of geography for the acquisition of power was visible during the geopolitical competition between the Russian and the British Empires during the 19th century in Central Asia. It is pertinent to note that political thought in the 20th century, was also influenced by geopolitics. Today, technological advances and ideological competition have elevated the logic that the restraints of geography could be overcome, making it no more influential. However, strategic thinkers have realised the importance of geography and they believe that it affects states' behaviour. It is also believed that the global issues are mostly geo-economic in nature but in actual fact, these are deep-rooted in geopolitics.

Power maximisation is not irrelevant even in the present-day Central Asian politics, where great powers are playing on a broader canvas to materialise their interests. Moreover, new emerging regional security threats, in response to the power play, demonstrate the relevance of geopolitics. Interestingly, today's power politics is shifting away from the use of military force to the formulation of alliances. Similarities and continuities of international players' policies are reminiscent of the historical great game of empires. The changing trends in the post-Cold War period and the resurgence of the old powerful states in Asia is an attention-grabbing phenomenon for scholars as many are revamping their thinking and revisiting the ideas. Zbigniew Brzezinski, in *The Grand Chessboard* (1998), had also asserted the relevance of Mackinder's Heartland Theory by dubbing Eurasia as the epicentre of global power.⁸ He accepted that no challenger could be skilled enough to dominate the Eurasian region. It is also maintained by the scholars that the region has remained at a pivotal crossroads and a battlefield for world-class powers

⁷ It refers to the collection of plans and policies that comprise deliberate effort of a state to harness political, military, diplomatic and economic tools to advance its national interest. Grand Strategy is the art of reconciling ends and means. Peter Feaver, "What is Grand Strategy and Why do We Need it?," *Foreign Policy*, April 8, 2009, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/04/08/what-is-grand-strategy-and-why-do-we-need-it>

⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

over centuries.⁹ Keeping in mind that vast natural resources of the landlocked CARs can easily increase the wealth of any power holding its reserves, the relevance of Heartland (includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) can be realised in today's world politics, where the pursuit of power has transformed into a new form.

In present-day politics, the function of geopolitical theory has also been widely criticised and hesitations appeared on the application of this theory. The first point is that the dictum is based on the one assessment of the world and policies are mental formations of decision-makers, who are not only looking at the geographies but economic, political and social aspects effect largely on foreign policies. The critics pointed out that rail and ships are losing significance due to increased air transport, and air strikes make the 'Heartland' exposed to other states, these considerations make the theory impractical in the actual world. Geopolitical matters are being affected by globalisation, trade, investment and economic interdependence and it appears that in the new narrative, geography, separately, will be an inappropriate interpretation of the affairs among nations, is emerging. "Relations among states are governed by much more than the extent of their physical proximity... the way the population of these countries organise themselves, the resources available and their ability to exploit them, the nature of their beliefs, fears and aspirations still provide the basic raw material of international politics."¹⁰ However, in all these arguments, it has been focused that remote areas are approachable. The Eurasian landmass is within the range of nuclear weapons and missiles while, in addition, drones can reach and can easily smash targets in any corner of the world. For instance, the US military accurately targeted Taliban's hideouts in Afghanistan by using a GPS guided bomb, GUB-43, on April 13, 2017.¹¹

This study fully takes account of the external environment and is cognisant of the technical innovations and accuracy of weapons. A comprehensive inquiry has been made to see the usefulness of

⁹ Margaret Scott and Westenley Alcenat, "Revisiting the Pivot: The Influence of Heartland Theory in Great Power Politics," (2008), www.scribd.com/document/267614840/The-Influence-of-Heartland-Theory-in-Great-Power-Politics.

¹⁰ Ronald Hee, "World Conquest: The Heartland Theory of Halford J Mackinder," *Pointer* (Jul-Sep 1998): 24, www.mindef.gov.sg

¹¹ "US Military Drops Largest Non-nuclear Bomb in Afghanistan," *Dawn*, April 13, 2017.

geopolitical theory in today's world. It is found that the extensive troops and logistical supplies, even today, can only be moved by using traditional means of transport. Moreover, traditional means of communication can still help states to conduct huge trade because other means of trade have proved expensive. Theory of Heartland (pivot of Asia) is mostly judged in terms of its accuracy, which emphasises on the continuation of the hegemonic designs over the Eurasian landmass.

New Contenders with New Strategies

The Tsars of Russia and the British Empire competed to establish their hold on Central and South Asia, respectively in the 19th century. This had made Afghanistan a buffer state between the two and consequently, a hotspot of foreign involvement. To stabilise Afghanistan, a new shift in the regional alliances, led by Russia and China, is taking place. Furthermore, the US is also an important stakeholder for enduring peace in the region. Hence, political temperatures have been fluctuating in Central Asia, which represent accurately show of power play in this region. Afghanistan is indeed very important for the CARs as they are landlocked and seeking partners to conduct trade. However, the Southern trade routes of Central Asia will remain challenging until peace is restored in Afghanistan.¹² Transit to Central Asia via Iran or Pakistan is being delayed due to instability in Afghanistan and new rules are coming from Beijing, Moscow and Washington to revive geopolitical connections. The exercise of power maximisation has been exposing strategic interests of the great powers in Central Asia since 2001. The situation is delineated by Stephen Blank "the great game [in Central Asia] will not end but it will be intensified."¹³ Presently, the great powers in Central Asia (China, Russia and the US) are aware of the geopolitical importance of this area and all are engaged to exert influence in Central Asia.

The dynamic interaction of states has made this region volatile. The military presence of the US around Russia (military bases in the CARs in history) is giving birth to new complexities. The US is more interested in the encirclement of China, whereas, China is trying to ensure stability by

¹² Munir Akram, "The New Great Game," *Dawn*, October 6, 2016, www.dawn.com/news/1264242

¹³ Amy Liedy, "The Great Power Rivalry in Central Asia," Kennan Institute, July 7, 2011, www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-great-power-rivalry-central-asia,

pacifying its western part, where Uyghur separatists are posing a serious challenge to the government.¹⁴ Furthermore, Russia is also a stakeholder and interested in guarding its oil and gas reserves and the physical security of the mainland Russia. “Russia’s strategic interests in security field take the highest priority. Non-traditional security is also a concern because of the rise of Islamic militancy and drug trafficking poses real threats to the southern border of Russia.”¹⁵

The control over the “Pivotal Area” whether a direct rule or through ideological alliances, hegemonic influence over Heartland has been the main characteristic of great powers. In practical terms, Mackinder’s sayings suggested a tug of war over the control of eastern Europe and eventually the world by the great powers. Geopolitical moves are nowadays very different and states cannot act in the similar way as they did in the past. Mammoth involvement of the three great powers along with their regional allies endangers an already perplexed situation. “Being at the nucleus of interest of Washington, Moscow and Beijing, Central Asia became unique in terms of global interconnectedness.”¹⁶

The Heartland theory has certainly been applied in various analyses of Central Asia’s interaction with its regional and extra regional powers. After September 11, 2001, and the subsequent US invasion of Afghanistan, the Heartland theory has come back vehemently into the political discourse. Today’s Central Asia is widely considered as an integrated region even after the independence of the CARs. Hitherto, Heartland states are important for the great powers. Although it can be noticed that maritime nations of the western Europe are using their fleets, however, the significance of land power is intact. The increased investment by the US, Japan and Turkey have appeared in the form of credits and grants; an extensive surge in investment depicts the desire to obtain an influential position in this pivotal area. Likewise, Russia’s geopolitical struggle also fits in the race of great powers, to control lucrative Central Asia. Henceforth, increasing interests of the big

¹⁴ Russell Ong, *China’s Security Interests in the 21st Century* (London: Routledge Taylor and Frances Group, 2007), 101.

¹⁵ David B H Denoon, ed., *China, the United States, and the Future of Central Asia: US-China Relations* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 157.

¹⁶ Michal Romanowski, “Decoding Central Asia: What’s Next for the US Administration?,” *Diplomat*, February 28, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/02/decoding-central-asia-whats-next-for-the-us-administration/>

powers in natural resources has invited a tug-of-war in the region. It offers an interesting power contest of big powers along with regional players including Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and India.

Russia's Pursuit of Power

Russia, as a neighbouring country with the huge size of geography, focuses on regional stability that is also linked to the security of its own borders. The Heartland theory is very much backing Eurasianist ideology in Russia and has acquired a degree of conviction in Russia. It has strong political influence in Russia, provided a strong base to Eurasianism ideology and widely appeared in the writing of Aleksandr Dugin, in the 1990s as he speaks the rehabilitation of an old grandiose dream in the shape of a 'Euro-Soviet Empire.'¹⁷ Geopolitics emerged as an associate of the Eurasian ideology in Russia. Eurasianists jettison the view that Russia is situated on the fringe of Europe and call it the pivot of the world. Hence, the Eurasian Heartland is the centre through which the Kremlin can restrain the Western influence. This shows that Russia, despite the loss of its superpower status, continued to prove it as a great power. Today, the foreign policy of Russia can be examined within the framework of a neo-Eurasian project which holds a meaningful quality as various scholars and practitioners are of the view that Russia's old status of a powerful state has been changing into a neo-Eurasian project. Eurasianists focus on geopolitical links with the CARs and supports to form a new union between Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia kindled non-western world with independent courses of actions. In Russia, it has been used as a comprehensive way of life, which covers the whole range of geopolitical thought. Indeed, this philosophy is greatly copied from the Heartland theory and follows an exceptional identity which is distinct from the West.

The control of the Eurasia will [in the end] result in the control of the whole world, Mackinder maintained that "who rules eastern Europe commands the Heartland, who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island' and who rules the World-Island commands the world."¹⁸ This proposition endorsed the strategic planning of the great powers. The

¹⁷ John B Dunlop, "Aleksandr Dugin's Foundations of Geopolitics," *Stanford University*, tec.fsi.stanford.edu/docs/aleksandr-dugins-foundations-geopolitics,

¹⁸ Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (New York, Norton and Company, 1962), 241.

Heartland is shown as secure and difficult to penetrate; however, its weaker part is perilous for Russia's interests in Central Asia. "This was the fortress area ran westwards from the Yenisei River, the mountains of Central Asia and the arid tableland but was vulnerable from its western side where the Baltic states and Black Sea were not blocked geographically."¹⁹ Nevertheless, his conclusion appeared more relevant to Russia's quest for power particularly in its course of resurgence.

After 2000, a period of pervasive engagement of the Russia-Central Asian ties began. In the pursuit of a great power status, Moscow has launched a new campaign of regional influence under Vladimir Putin. Russia applied a mix of soft and hard power tactics to regain its position.²⁰ In addition, new regional organisations were constructed on the pattern of Western organisations. To achieve its geopolitical interests in Central Asia, Russia is turning up its economic power for military purposes and its regional power patron thinking is noticeable in its economic and security policies. The formation of ideological alliances was an old strategy of the Soviet Russia and similar rules are currently manifested in its foreign policy. The formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) are indicative of the Kremlin's attempt to emulate the model of other states to exert influence.

Basic rights were granted to the US in Central Asia, which not only stirred up external power's involvement in the form of foreign exercises but stimulated academic circles to analyse Russia's supremacy as it is widely considered as resurgent state, engaged in Central Asia to counterbalance the US. To promote the Russian influence in the Eurasia, the use of force is an acceptable choice as Moscow continued to believe in using it as an important political tool. Moscow's aggression in Georgia and the Ukraine are evidence of its geopolitical aspirations. The use of hard security measures is becoming popular and it appears that the realist paradigm, mixed up with geopolitical features, has infused Russia's foreign policy. It is not surprising that Moscow wields much influence (albeit decreasing) over its former republics in Central Asia as many elites of the CARs are

¹⁹ Gerard Chaliand, ed., *The Art of War in World History: From Antiquity to the Nuclear Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 828-29.

²⁰ Iulian Chifu and Simona Tutuianu, *Torn Between East and West: Europe's Border States* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 73.

Russians and communication is directed towards Moscow. Moscow is managing to obtain its interests and confluence of material capabilities (land grab) and strategic purposes make it an important state. However, Russia's strong influence on endogenous and exogenous directions of the CARs is being compromised because of the involvement of other major powers.

US Ploys

The year 2001, can be taken as a reference point when the US attacked Afghanistan to highlight revolutionised interaction of the CARs with great powers. The US opened its bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, launched its war on terrorism in Afghanistan and engaged other states in a strategic partnership to combat terrorism. Notwithstanding, several peace initiatives were taken by the US and Russia in which both pledged to fight against terrorism and to ensure peace in Afghanistan. The US also gave a plan to establish the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) which aimed to conduct trade with Afghanistan by using the territory of several states including Russia. "The key to development in the region is a trade, which in turn requires improvements in transport" stated Sir Fredrick Starr.²¹

The American bases in the CARs immediately revealed power politics and geopolitical competitiveness between the US and Russia, making Central Asia appear as a window into the multi-polar world.²² Although the US has no geographical proximity with Central Asia, it became an unchallenged super power in the 1990s and wielded influence over the post-Soviet area. Central Asia became the forefront to the US after 9/11, its unsuccessful presence in Afghanistan rather has brought more regional complexities. It appears that the US has one common interest with Russia and China i.e., to combat terrorism, "the primary US interest is in security, in preventing the Afghanisation of Central Asia and the spawning of more terrorist groups with transnational reach that can threaten the stability of all the interlocking regions and strike the US."²³

²¹ S Frederick Starr, "A Partnership for Central Asia" *Foreign Affairs* 84 no. 4 (July/August 2005), www.foreignaffairs.com.

²² Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, 11.

²³ Fiona Hill, "The United States and Russia in Central Asia: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran," Brookings, www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/the-united-states-and-russia-in-central-asia-uzbekistan-tajikistan-afghanistan-pakistan-and-iran/

The Eurasian region is still a centre of competition for the great powers, as it was in history (during the Cold War) for the control of natural resources. It seems that the struggle for power will continue. Especially after 9/11, the situation has become complex in which Russia and China's alliance began to grow, disrupting the US moves in the region. Russia is making peace overtures in Afghanistan as it always shows its concerns over the presence of militants in Afghanistan and its effects on the CARs. Russia and China take Afghanistan as a podium to launch their new strategy to control Central Asia.

“Security matters still tend to dominate the US-Central Asia agenda. Yet, with the reduced military footprint in Afghanistan, Washington has been forced to rekindle its regional policy. The US’ Silk Road initiative, announced in 2011, was a misfire. Poorly financed and too Afghanistan-oriented, the strategy did not bear fruit. Currently, the US presence in Afghanistan is almost ended and Central Asia is emerging as a considerable area in terms of security.”²⁴

It is visible that regional economic order, made up by Russia and China for the CARs, has curbed the US influence. After staying several years in Afghanistan, the US could not bring peace. Hence, regional powers, including Russia and Iran, are criticising the US and its allies for its failure to abolish extremism in Afghanistan.²⁵ Russia and China remained concerned with the US physical presence in Central Asia. “SCO has developed clearly an anti US stance and opposes the US military presence in Central Asia.”²⁶ Currently, the numbers of US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces in Afghanistan are reduced but its security, economic and military interests are intact. The foreign policies of the CARs, because of geographical proximity with Afghanistan, are still crucial for the US. Hence, a new multilateral dialogue platform has been established in September 2015, namely C5+1, it focuses on improving the US-Central Asian relations.²⁷ It also seeks to focus interregional cooperation projects.

²⁴ Romanowski, “Decoding Central Asia.”

²⁵ Dawood Azami, “World Powers Jostle in Afghanistan’s New ‘Great Game’,” *BBC*, January 12, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38582323>

²⁶ C Christain Fair, “Pakistan’s Relations with Central Asia: Is Past Prologue?,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31, issue 12 (2008): 212.

²⁷ Lidiya Parkhomchik, “New Format of Dialogue between the US and Central Asian States: C5+1 Initiative,” Eurasian Research Institute, April 19, 2016, eurasian-research.org/en/research/comments/economy/new-format-dialogue-between-us-and-central-asian-states-c51-initiative

Strategic Presence of China

The establishment of the US bases in the CARs alarmed China and Russia and it was sensed that the US presence might be permanent. The US regional security cooperation with the CARs prompted coordination meetings between Russia and China. Hence, regional organisations, including Russian-led organisations such as CSTO sought to rescue both the Russian and Chinese hegemony from the US. “Two decades into the post-Cold War era, the US now finds its power and influence increasingly challenged by the emergence of rising powers, new regional institutions.”²⁸ It appears that the phase of intense competition has begun in which institutions seem to be in a stronger position to erode the Western hegemony. To attain regional stability and to maintain their influence, in 2001, Russia and China established the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) which facilitated negotiation among China, Russia and the CARs.

Security and economic initiatives are being taken to ensure regional stability by rejecting the US unilateralism. The SCO is equally popular with the CARs and in its interaction with other multilateral organisations.²⁹ At first, China’s engagement with the CARs was based on internal troubles i.e., territorial integrity and to settle issues of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, bordering Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.³⁰ Therefore, the SCO is predominantly considered an important instrument to settle border issues. It has also promoted inter-governmental ties which is a prerequisite for internal and external peace as well as for strong regional economic integration. Keeping in view China’s fast growing economy, it becomes obvious that Beijing requires oil imports because it is one of the world’s principal importer and a leading consumer (including the US and Japan). Thus it seems that a new great game is revolving around China’s One Belt, One Road (OBOR); the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a section of this outstanding project.³¹ Beijing sees access to the Central Asian

²⁸ Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, 12.

²⁹ Mikhail A Konarovsky, “Central Asia and the War against Terrorism: A View from Russia,” Elizebeth Van Wie Davis and Rouben Azizian, eds., *Islam, Oil and Geopolitics: Central Asia after September 11* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 20.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

³¹ Akram, “The New Great Game.”

resources through pipelines passing through its western part (desert) which is crucial for its energy security.

China's domination over Central Asia, in terms of trade, is making it an influential player in the region. Beijing will be the foremost economic partner of the CARs. The massive investment of China in Central Asia's infrastructure, communication and technology shows the Chinese influence.³² Beijing is also concerned with the security situation in its bordering states as a peaceful border will contribute to its stability. Furthermore, China's preparation of strategic oil reserves in its north-western part is its 21st century goal. China's motives in the region are more extensive than those of the US and Russia "China wants to secure its province Xinjiang from the intervention of Islamic extremism."³³ However, the US influence, especially after 9/11, in Central Asia created unease for China as it has historical links with the CARs. "China has capacity to advance its interests, took a 'go slow' approach, Beijing not wanting to make its move too quickly if China's long term goals remained uncompromised."³⁴

It appears that cooperation between the US, Russia and China over regional issues will not be durable as the security situation is unsure due to Afghanistan. The interests of the great powers in Central Asia has spurred a contest between the surrounding states of Central Asia such as Pakistan, India and Afghanistan, which are now more actively interacting with the CARs. Moreover, strategic rivalry between states appears in their foreign policies towards Central Asia as the CARs are leaning towards powerful regional actors for the settlements of their issues. They are becoming members of several important organisations, new regional alignments are in formation, which causes tension between the US, Russia and China, leading to Moscow-Beijing assertiveness towards Washington.³⁵

³² Marlene Laruelle and Sebastien Peyrouse, *Globalising Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Challenges of Economic Development* (London: Routledge Taylor and Frances Group, 2015), 38.

³³ Mughees Ahmad and Musharaf Rubab, "New Great Game in Theory and Application: A Case study of Central Asia," *Government IV*, (2015): 45.

³⁴ Martha Brill Olcott, "Eyes on Central Asia: How to Understand the Winners and Losers," http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/coe21/publish/no16_1_ses/01_olcott.pdf.

³⁵ Marcin Kaczmarek, *Russia- China Relations in the Post Crisis International Order* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 129.

The great power play is also intensifying extremism and terrorism in the CARs as a political radicalisation of Islam and militant networks were already existed in this region under the Soviet empire.³⁶ The Taliban, Islamic movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Islamic Renaissance party of Tajikistan (IRPT) and Hizb-u-Tahrir are considering foreign powers a threat to Islam. Besides, the suppression of 'Daesh' (a militant group, designated as terrorist organisation by the UN) in Syria can increase fighters in Afghanistan; Central Asia's exposure to Daesh in the coming years is possible due to Russia's move to draw down its military presence in Syria.³⁷ The fear of the growth of Daesh in Afghanistan is an alarming situation for bordering states, Pakistan, China, Iran and the CARs.

The issue of the management of resources of the CARs, by the great powers, has given birth to a tug-of-war. The vested interests of the great powers in Central Asia is giving birth to coercive practices, as governments of the CARs are now authorised to use coercion in the name of a state of emergency. The War on Terror (WoT) provided an ideal opportunity for the Central Asian leaders to frame their internal security practices as part of a broader international coalition and to justify coercive practices as part of a permanent international state of emergency.³⁸ Moreover, a wave of 'coloured revolutions'³⁹ (after Georgia's Rose revolution in 2003, Ukraine's Orange revolution in 2004) has reached in Central Asia, too. Political instability in Kyrgyzstan has given birth to Tulip Revolution (2005),⁴⁰ which is enough to show weaknesses in the political system. The quality of democracy is still not improved in Central Asia because great powers are mostly dealing with local rulers for the fulfilment of their interest rather for quality assurance.

³⁶ Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Birth of Nations* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 144

³⁷ Abdul Aziz, "Terrorism in Central Asia: Different Names, Same Outcome," *Stratfor*, March 24, 2016, www.stratfor.com/the-hub/terrorism-central-asia-different-names-same-outcome

³⁸ Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, 99.

³⁹ Colored Revolution is a term, usually used to elaborate uprising in communist states. It denotes a peaceful uprising. See Evgeny Finkel and Yitzhak M Brudny, eds., *Coloured Revolutions and Authoritarian Reactions* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁴⁰ Olcott, "Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution," *Carnegie Russia and Eurasia Program*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 28, 2005, www.carnegieendowment.org

Evolving Prospects

The above-mentioned factors introduced new panoramas in this region, noticeable impacts are developed for bordering states of the CARs and new apprehensive approaches are taking place in the region. In response to the changing dynamics in Central Asia, neighbouring states are gearing up for future challenges. The CARs are on a different trajectory, where geopolitical orientation is shifting from the West to the East. However, so far, no single country has established hegemony over these states.

The CARs are exuberantly looking for an enhanced economic and security engagement from militarily viable partners. However, despite all the efforts to curb terrorism, militancy is spreading its wings in the region. The security situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating because of the competitive moves of the great powers — Russia, China and the US. Moreover, China chooses the CARs and Pakistan to connect to other regions of the world. This has generated new suspicions in India and a backlash has started to appear in different forms. In order to connect Central Asia, India, Iran and Afghanistan trinity has dramatically appeared to bypass Pakistan. China's growing influence in Central Asia is becoming challenging for India and bringing Pakistan closer to the CARs. Therefore, India has laid out the strategies to get closer to the CARs and in 2012, the Indian government has announced a new policy called "Connect Central Asia."⁴¹ India is also exploring possibilities to get engaged with Russia as Pakistan is entering a new epoch of relations with Russia, too.

Pakistan, being an old partner of China, is revamping its old relations with the CARs, for example, the energy agreement with Kyrgyzstan in 2016, (all partners intensified internal cooperation in 2005 for the development of electricity trading arrangements) was meant to fulfil the energy needs of Pakistan. "This implies a forecast of about 1000 MW of import from the CASA-1000 line from 2016 onwards."⁴² Similarly, the ground breaking ceremony of Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, in 2015, by the Prime Minister of Pakistan is in anticipation of good times. "TAPI project will bring peace to the region and

⁴¹ Denoon, *China, The United States, and the Future of Central Asia*, 286.

⁴² "ESIA and ESMP of the Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission Project (CASA 1000): Feasibility Stage," August, 2011, 19www.casa-1000.org

promote trade,” said Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.⁴³ Although these projects are old but changing geopolitical situation has made these development of special attention.

Another important development is the emerging relationship between Russia and China, the political statements to integrate OBOR and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). It appears that integration projects are overlapping and creating new opportunities (with some risks) for the CARs. Hence, the CARs must be very careful in dealing with the great powers “a long-term rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing could affect the development of independent foreign policies because the region will be under the influence of these powerful geopolitical players,” suggested by Fabio Indeo.⁴⁴

In this changing regional environment, the Central Asian region has emerged relatively stable but new challenges are surmountable. Although the US influence is diminishing in Central Asia as the region is more under influence of Russia and China. However, the new plan of the US to coordinate with CARs, through C5+1,⁴⁵ is an indication of the US intentions to keep its influence in the region. Furthermore, the US and India have started a dialogue for economic assistance and are stepping up the Indian involvement in Afghanistan. A shift has appeared in the US moves as it is no more giving importance to the CARs as a gateway to Afghanistan. Hence, the concentration will be more on infrastructure development and capacity building in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

In today’s world politics, when states are more interdependent and busy in forming economic and political alliances, ideological clashes are replaced by economic competition. International actors are engaged in energy politics and their geopolitical motives are unleashed in their race

⁴³ “25 Years in the Making: PM Nawaz Attends TAPI Groundbreaking Ceremony,” *Dawn*, December 13, 2015.

⁴⁴ Fabio Indeo, “The Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt: the Impact of the Sino-Russian Geopolitical Strategies in the Eurasia Region,” Maastricht School of Management, Working Paper no. 2016/5, 14.

⁴⁵ “Central Asia Regional,” United State Agency for International Development (USAID), www.usaid.gov/central-asia-regional

for influence. Notwithstanding, the significance of geopolitics has re-emerged on an international level and entrenched well in the formulation of foreign policies of states.

The geographical location of the CARs which lies at the core of Eurasia and energy resources in Central Asia, have always been making this region important for international players. The vast natural resources of the landlocked Central Asia can potentially create a strong hegemon as it can fulfil the energy needs of the great powers. The CARs have been striving for stability since 1992, and facing several challenges to bring prosperity to the region. Despite their divergences of interests, they tend to look for synergy in their matters, which is difficult to attain because of protracted conflicts. The regional players have justified their presence in Central Asia, largely, because of the volatility of the region. Moreover, Russia and China are cognisant that failure of the US to stabilise Afghanistan would place their interests in danger. Therefore, the regional actors have sought to promote regional integration and investing in infrastructure building in the CARs.

To sum up, it can be said that the geopolitical settings in Central Asia have always been intricate. Internal weaknesses of the CARs have given opportunities to international actors to be guarantors of economic development and security, yet, the outcome is unpredictable. Although Russia and China have successfully increased their volume of trade with the CARs, intra-regional trade is very low. There are very few indicators showing stability in Central Asia as their borders are dangerous and regional skirmishes are protracted. It appears that China will move cogently into this region by aligning itself with neighbours of the CARs. The US is planning to stay in this area for long period, whereas, Russia is struggling to retain its old position so that its old assets within Central Asia remain safe. Currently, a new paradox has appeared where multilateral organisations are involved in geopolitical and geo-economic matters. New regional advances demonstrate that a new 'great game' is evolving with the new actors. However, the future of the CARs is still dependent on the vested interests of the great powers.