

**US Interests in Central Asia
Since the Disintegration of Soviet Union**

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The dismemberment of the Soviet Union in December 1991 brought about a profound transformation in the nature of international politics. Graham E. Fuller, compares the disintegration of Soviet Union to the collapse of the Ottoman and Hapsburg empires during the first World War.[1] Among the most important ramifications of the collapse of the USSR were the emergence of the new states of Central Asia and the consequential geopolitical shift, which posed challenges for the Eurasian States during post cold war phase.

Significance of Central Asia

The Central Asian republics assumed greater importance owing to a number of factors. The most prominent among them are the reserves of huge hydrocarbon resources and their unique strategic location because of the proximity to four nuclear weapon states – Russia, China, India and Pakistan. Moreover, the region was a vibrant part of the world economy and formed crucial corridor connecting East and West and south and North. The significance of geostrategic location of Central Asia, previously known as Soviet Middle Asia did not change even after the disintegration of Soviet Union.[2] The geographical contiguity of Central Asia with the Middle East and south West Asian region has further enhanced the geopolitical significance and sensitivity to the region for all major regional players (Iran, Turkey, Russia, China), as well as extra-regional powers (USA, Pakistan, India). Each of these countries competed with the other to broaden its influence on the basis of ethno-cultural and historical factors. For example, Turkey used its close cultural affinity with Central Asian countries (except Tajikistan) to multiply its influence. Similarly Russia having close historical cultural and political relations intended to formulate a clear-cut foreign policy towards Central Asia which is also known as ‘Soft Underbelly’ of Russia. Pakistan and Iran tried to influence by playing the Islamic card. The competing struggle between the regional players and extra-regional powers to multiply their influence and the determination of Central Asian rulers to maintain their utmost freedom by diversifying their security politics are constant factors in evolving political scenario in the region.

From the early 1990s, till September 11, 2001, it appeared that a joint Sino-Russian hegemony was beginning to take shape in Central Asia. The September 11 terrorist attack in the United States and the subsequent US campaign against terrorism have radically changed that perception, however. The Central Asian states have also seized the opportunity to diversify their security relations.

In this backdrop, the paper examines some of the fundamentals of this emerging geopolitics by addressing US interests and policies in Central Asia with special reference to the post-September 11, developments and how the mutuality of interests after September 11 incident has brought Central Asian republics and United States closer to one another. To understand the contradictory interests of major powers in the emerging geopolitics of Central Asia, the paper also examines major powers' reactions (Russia, China and Iran) with regard to the permanent deployment of US military base in Central Asia.

US Interests

In Central Asia the US Policy since the mid-1990s shifted from earlier indifference to engagement. The United States recognised the independence of the Central Asian countries and started to focus on developing bilateral ties with Central Asia, beginning with Secretary of State, James Baker's visit to the region in January 1992 and opening of diplomatic representation in all these countries. The multidimensional priorities of US in Central Asian region were the containment of the Islamic Fundamentalism. The former US Secretary of state, James Baker, publicly warned Central Asian leaders to stay clear of radical Islam and the influence of Iran.[3] Secondly, Kazakhstan's possession of nuclear weapons sent an alarming signal at global level and US made an effort to put a cap on the proliferation of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction. The US diplomacy resulted in the signing up of a treaty in May 1992, when the President of Kazakhstan agreed to sign the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START-1), with the objective of elimination of one-third of Soviet and the US nuclear weapons.[4] Thirdly the huge energy potential was seen as an alternative to the middle Eastern oil resources for future. Shafiqul Islam, an economist has aptly stated that "The natural resources that has attracted the attention of American, Japanese and other foreign investors to Central Asia is energy oil, and natural gas.[5] In order to secure the energy resources, the US promoted the economic stabilisation of the Central Asian states by encouraging US oil companies to participate in developing plans for marketing and transportation of oil that involved Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. The interest in oil reserves received impetus in 1994, after the release of a report by US Department of Energy, estimating the potential of Caspian Sea oil reserves to be around 200 billion barrels, that made it comparable to Saudi reserves.[6]

Fourthly, to promote democracy and human rights US followed a very guarded policy. On the one hand the US criticised the ruling regimes for human rights violations, but on the other the US declined to take concrete measures. For the promotion of democracy and human rights the US cultivated relations with countries in the region and actively supported the activities of various NGOs. It also granted subsidy to various projects and tactfully monitored the effective use of its funding through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). It was also found that the leaders of these states have supported the involvement of World Bank, the IMF and other developmental agencies.

US Interests and Policies in Post-1995 Period

The US interest in the region was also driven by the growing economic interests of China and ethno-religious pressure from Iran and their political support for the independence of the states.

In this context, American moves were seen to be in direct confrontation with Russian Chinese and Iranian interests. The US also signalled its ability and readiness to secure its interests on military front. The US government announced that it intended to include Central Asia in the area of responsibility of the Central Command of the American Armed Forces from 1999 onwards.[7]

Among the Central Asian States the US policy makers look at Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan as the main states in the region, with Uzbekistan as the key to security and Kazakhstan as the most important country from the point of view of economy. Three Central Asian states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan – were encouraged to form a Joint Peacekeeping battalion. The first exercise involving this battalion was held in the fall of 1997 in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. A unit of the US 82nd Airborne took part in the exercise, along with troops from Turkey, Georgia, Russia and Latvia.[8] Another exercise took place in Kazakhstan in September 2000, again with soldiers from the US 82nd Airborne along with troops from Turkey, Georgia, Russia, Azerbaijan, Mongolia, and the United Kingdom.[9] The Joint NATO-PFP exercise (though more of UN-type peacekeeping simulation exercises) took place in 1997 and 1998. All the Central Asian republics have also joined NATO's North American Cooperation Council (NACC).

In the region, US policy focuses on "Caspian Basin", a term encompassing portion of both Central Asia and the Caucasus and the policy aims at much more than resource development. Rejecting the region's 19th century experience of the "Great Game", which pitted Britain against Russia in a contest for supremacy, US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott stated in 1997, "our goal is to avoid and actively to discourage that atavistic outcome... what we want to help bring about is just the opposite: we want to see all responsible players in Central Asia and Caucasus be winners".[10] The US policy embraces the goal of region-wide independence, global integration, and political and economic reforms. However, the fact of the matter is that Russia, Iran, China and other neighbouring power see US support for regional transformation as a cover for an ambitious and hegemonic policy designed to exclude traditional actors and benefit Washington.

Interest in Energy Sector

Energy is the driving force for US companies involved in the region. US oil major UNOCAL had the blessing of the state department to access Central Asian energy through Afghanistan. UNOCAL owns a contract to exploit the Dauletabad gas field in Turkmenistan, which is the fourth largest on the planet. The project was halted when the Taliban regime became unmanageable. After President Bush came to power, he appointed Zalmay Khalilzad, a former UNOCAL consultant, as his special envoy to Afghanistan. Afghan leader Hamid Karzai was also appointed as consultant to UNOCAL, and these two officials are seeking to revitalise the dormant project. Large multinational energy firms are competing and cooperating among themselves to bring oil and natural gas to market. Among US-based firms, Chevron and Exxon Mobil, BP and Halliburton have invested substantially in the region. The energy companies are also concerned about the pipeline routes. Most have seen their interest best served in insisting that commercial viability be the most important determinant of pipeline routes. The US government efforts to place geopolitical consideration ahead of commercial viability on the determination of pipeline routes create a tension between the leading economic actors in the

region and US government policy. The Clinton Administration argued for the pipeline from Baku to Ceyhan in Turkey as one of the multiple routes.

Terrorism as a Factor

Washington's Central Asia policy has been geared by its strategic motivations of containing and eliminating terrorism emanating from the region. The Central Asian leaders, facing the threat of Islamic radicalism, terrorism and drug trafficking, were of course eager to cooperate with the US against the war of terrorism. All five states had identified these issues as their main security threats and Afghanistan as the locus of those threats.[11] Before September 11, the Central Asian leaders were grappling with religious rebel groups, many of whom were receiving arms and training from the Taliban. Among these groups, the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), with an aim to create Islamic state in Uzbekistan, was considered as the most important militant organization. In year 2000, the US government included the IMU in its list of terrorist organization, and determined to provide more military and economic resources to fight against Islamic militants. President Karimov of Uzbekistan hoped the effort of the US government would be extended to fight Taliban's ideological counterparts in Uzbekistan.[12] However, the US attempt was shattered with the tragic event of September 11 that finally unearthed the links between the Fundamentalist Taliban Regime in Afghanistan and international Islamic terrorism.[13]

US Interests and Policies after September 11

The terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 on World Trade Centre and Pentagon has made a dramatic reconfiguration in the global politics as well as a shift in the ranking of American foreign and security priorities. The relocation of Central Asia from the periphery to the very centre of American strategic interest has fundamentally altered the balance of the three "Great Players" – Russia, China and Iran. The current geopolitical chess game in Central Asia, referred to as "Great Anti-terrorist Game", [14] is different from the earlier geopolitical developments.

The war on terrorism has brought with it new dimensions and has profoundly involved the US in the region. The US government has acquired basing on transit rights for passage of war planes and military supplies from the countries in Central Asia, West Asia and their periphery, a projection of American power into the Center of Eurasian landmass that has no historical precedent.[15] The Central Asian republics support US led war against terrorism and the leaders of all the republics after the 9/11 condemned the attacks in America and tendered their help. In the aftermath of 9/11, Uzbekistan's leader allowed its southern air base in Khanabad for the stationing of US troops, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan followed suit.

Importance of Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan has emerged as the key Central Asian strategic partner to the US. It is recognised as the most important regional player due to its geographical location, a border with Afghanistan, shares a border with each of the other four. Uzbekistan has an important crossing point into Afghanistan at a place called Termez. Uzbekistan immediately offered basing facilities for US and allied forces. Uzbekistan enjoys a more special status, since it signed a strategic security pact

with the US on 12th October 2001, which the Uzbek government termed as having established ‘a qualitatively new relationship based on a long-term commitment to advance security and regional stability’.[16] By an agreement, it gave the United States extended use of Khanabad base in the Karshi Province, the biggest air base in Central Asia, used as the staging post by the Soviet Union for flying its troops to Afghanistan. With the acquisition of a permanent military foothold in Central Asia through its air base in Uzbekistan, US has become a major player in the new version of the 19th century “Great Game”.

On October 2001, a US-Uzbek joint statement was issued stating that the United States had extended security guarantees to President Islam Karimov’s regime. Subsequently Uzbekistan which had previously insisted that the US could only use Uzbek facilities for humanitarian and search and rescue mission have now sanctioned the use of its military facilities by the US armed forces for offensive military operations against Afghanistan.[17] In return, an Uzbek delegation visiting Washington in late November 2001 received an economic package of \$100 million in form of aid, followed by an announcement that international leading organizations – such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) would also grant loans to Uzbekistan.

The Uzbek President Islam Karimov paid a four day official visit to the US in March 2002. The visit of Islam Karimov to US resulted in signing of the Declaration on strategic partnership between US and Uzbekistan. Besides, the sum of 100 million dollars allocated by the American Congress for maintenance of American troops in Uzbekistan, the US Congress additionally sanctioned a sum of \$161.8 million for assistance to Uzbekistan during the financial year 2002.

Tajikistan played a significant role by helping the Northern Alliance against the Taliban regime, by offering three of its air fields namely, Kulyab, Khojand and Kurgan-Tyube. It also assisted in the shipment of humanitarian aid to the northern part of Afghanistan. It was through Tajikistan that the massive Russian military assistance to the Northern Alliance was transported to launch an attack on the Afghanistan capital Kabul. The Tajik President, Rakhmonov said “Being in solidarity with the United States people, we at the same time express our willingness to cooperate with international community including US government, in the fight against international terrorism and extremism.”[18]

Importance of Kyrgyzstan

After Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan has welcomed US military access to its territory. Initially, Kyrgyzstan was extremely reluctant to accept the idea of US and its allied troops on its territory. The first Deputy Interior Minister of Kyrgyzstan welcoming the presence of US troops in his country suggested that there might be a long term future in Kyrgyzstan for armed forces of the US-led coalition “if the situation in the region deteriorates”. In December 2001, the Kyrgyz Parliament agreed to allow the US to set up a military base at Manas International Airport outside the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek. The air base is used for both offensive and humanitarian operations. It was agreed that airfield security would be the joint responsibility of American and Kyrgyz forces, with US troops guarding the perimeter. According to the Kyrgyzstan Security Councils Press release, the US has granted Kyrgyzstan \$3.5 million financial assistance for the year 2001, to be spent for purchase of spare parts of military helicopters as well as uniforms

transport vehicles and communication equipment for law enforcement and secret services of Kyrgyzstan.[19]

It supported the US led struggle against international terrorism in Afghanistan in the form of providing over flight clearances and also offered the use of its air space for strikes. President Nazarbayev while talking to the visiting US Secretary of State Collin Powell in December 2001 said, “from the very first day, Kazakhstan declared it would be in a coalition fighting terrorism and would help with all the forces it has as its disposal”.[20]

Turkmenistan, which follows the principles of permanent neutrality, also opened its air space for coalition over flights and for channeling humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. Turkmenistan, however, refused to open its air space and airfields to US war planes during the anti Taliban military campaign in Afghanistan. Turkmenistan Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov told journalists in Ashgabat after meeting Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov that Turkmenistan will participate in the International efforts in Afghanistan only in terms of humanitarian assistance.[21]

US Strategic and Economic Interests

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the geographic location of the region developed into one of strategic importance. The US military bases in Central Asia have placed the American forces close to China’s western frontier where, in combination with the US bases located in the proximity of China’s eastern and southern regions – such as those based in South Korea and the Indian Ocean – that allow the US to militarily encircle China. The Central Asian military bases also provide the US military with an outreach to Iran, which Bush signalled out as part of the ‘axis of evil’ in his state of the Union address in January 2002. Castigating the conduct of Chinese government as “alarming abroad and appalling at home”, Bush, while prepared to deal with China, said “China is a competitor, not a strategic partner”. In addition to maintaining stability in Afghanistan, the US military base in Central Asia provides a great opportunity to watch developments in Russia, China, and Iran.

The presence of US forces in the region have been criticised by the leaders of Russia, China, and Iran, these countries have expressed their concern over a long-term American military presence in “their backyards” Iranian leaders, in particular, have accused the United States of using the terrorism issue as a pretext to establish a long-term presence in the region and to enhance and protect its commercial interests. The important agenda for the US to have a strong base in Central Asia would be to deny any other powers the ability to dominate the region to the exclusion of American presence.[22]

The second strategic US interests in Central Asia after the post-September 11 development has been to prevent the spread of radical Islam and contain the threat of the militant Islamic Shiite organizations supported and trained from Iran. US considers Iran as a potential barrier to the achievement of its own influence in the post-Soviet Space. According to American perception Iran is responsible for the increase of terrorist organisations in West Asia and that it exports Islamic revolution to the neighbouring states. The US believes that its presence will prevent the transformation of Central Asia into a base for radical Islamic forces. It is also reported by some

analysts that America's desire to eliminate Iranian influence from Afghanistan, to prevent the expansion of its presence in Central Asia and especially to block the Southern export route through Iran for Central Asian energy was behind Pakistan's decision to create Taliban.[23] Even before the Afghan Mujaheden forces led by Tajik commander Ahmed Shah Masoud toppled the Afghan regime in April 1992, Mohammad Najibulla, the Afghan President, offered its services to the United States as a bulwark against Islamic fundamentalist.[24] US interests in the region will be served by denying Iranian presence in Central Asia.

Thirdly, the most significant bone of contention in their policies towards the Central Asian and Caucasus region is the oil and gas resources. The driving force behind this American venture according to many analysts is to ensure access for US companies to energy and other natural resources and markets in the region. The main oil and gas deposits in Central Asian republic are in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, whereas Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have enormous hydel resources. The discovery of huge hydro-carbon deposits in the Caspian Sea Basin is expected to convert this space into the 'Kuwait' of the 21st century.

The significance of Afghanistan for US stems from its geographical location as a potential transit route for oil and gas exports from Central Asia to the Arabian Sea. In the second half of the 1990s UNOCAL Corporation, a US oil giant, proposed the construction of an 890-mile, \$2 billion gas pipeline connecting Turkmenistan and Pakistan via Afghanistan. Besides the gas pipeline, UNOCAL also had considered building of an oil pipeline to carry oil from Turkmenistan to Pakistan's Arabian Sea coast via Afghanistan. Oil and gas pipelines from the Caspian Sea to Pakistan, India, and the Arabian Sea via Afghanistan are likely to be reconsidered once a sense of stability is established in Kabul.

Until recently, the existing pipelines in the Caspian region were designed to link the former Soviet Union internally and were routed through Russia. Since the late 1990s the attention has got focused on two schemes of pipeline project supported by Russia. First, the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC). The 940 mile line connects the Tengiz oil field in Kazakhstan to the Russian Black Sea Port Novorosiisk, with an initial capacity of 5,60,000 barrels per day (b/d), rising to 1.35 million b/d.[25] The Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) is seen by many analysts as a good example of cooperation between Moscow and Washington and Russia enjoys the biggest shareholder in the CPC with 24 percent interest. After Russia and Kazakhstan reached agreement on transit tariffs, the pipeline was officially opened on November 27, 2001.

In addition to the CPC, Russia has succeeded in advancing its interests on another frontier – the Blue Stream. In December 1997 Moscow and Ankara signed an agreement to build a pipeline connecting northern Turkey with Russian gas fields via the black Sea, at an estimated cost of \$2 to \$3 billion.

Given Iran's strategic location between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf and its relatively advanced energy infrastructure, Teheran sees itself as a natural transit route for oil and gas exports from the landlocked Central Asian countries to the world markets. Iran strongly believes the southern route through Iran offers a much lower cost as compared with the existing routes to the Black Sea and especially to those proposed to the Mediterranean. However, fact of the matter is that Iranian efforts to promote this vision have been restrained by strong US opposition.

In order to prevent Iran and Russia from monopolizing the region's energy reserves, the US in 1998 first introduced a 'Silk Road Strategy Act' to establish multiple pipelines to bring Kazakh, Turkmen and Azeri oil and gas to market.[26] Guided by its strategic goals, US strongly supported two transportation options: first, the US in cooperation with Turkey to carry oil from Baku in Azerbaijan on the western shore of the Caspian Sea, to Turkey's eastern Mediterranean oil terminal at Ceyhan; second, the Trans-Caspian Pipeline, to transport natural gas from Turkmenistan to Turkey. It is one of the few routes to skirt Iran and Russia. Others are the Baku-Supsa pipeline, which also passes through Georgia; a set of proposed – and since shelved–lines from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan.

The above deliberation infers that one cannot therefore ignore the connections between military bases and pipelines. Kazakhstan, which holds the lion's share of the oil and gas of the Caspian basin, is reportedly offering several locations for possible US military base. Turkmenistan is also viewed as a prime location for the terminus of largely US-financed pipelines bringing the oil and gas reserves of the region to the world market, possibly running across Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Indian Ocean. This would suit both the US and the Central Asian states – routing the gas through Iran that the Americans do not desire would be avoided, and Central Asian republics would not have to ship through Russian pipelines. Despite different assessments regarding the oil wealth of the region, US economic influence and presence in the region had been growing rapidly since the mid 1990s. Most of the oil giants like Chevron-Texaco, Exxon Mobil, BP, Halliburton, Pennzoil and Amoco have invested heavily in the enormous hydrocarbon potential of the Central Asian Region. The total investment over the last five years in Central Asia has grown from barely anything to \$20 billion, the largest beneficiary being oil-rich Kazakhstan. Thus, the driving force of US strategic and economic interests has been the sensitive issue of securing control and export of the region's vast oil and gas reserves. The leaders of Central Asian countries have been hoping that the American presence and peace in Afghanistan will ultimately benefit the oil industry which has for long been trying to find a way to bring the oil and gas to international markets.

Response to US Presence in Central Asia

The September 11, attack and subsequent US war against terrorism and occupation of Afghanistan have strengthened its military presence in the region. The post-September 11 has provided an opportunity to Central Asian Republics to forge friendly and cordial relationship with the US. The cooperation of Central Asian states with US in anti-terrorism campaign in Afghanistan is not without some rewards for these states. The following are some of the reasons that compel them to join with the US in anti-terrorism campaign:

1. Eradication of the Islamic militancy or fundamentalism is one of the reasons to join hands with the US-led coalition in its war against global terrorism. Most of the Central Asian states have suffered due to the violence resulting from the domestic Islamist movements, which had links with the Taliban and the Al-Qaeda. Since late 1990s Uzbekistan has been battling against the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a militant organisation that carried out terrorist attacks in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan during 1999 and 2000. The IMU and its fellow organisations like Tajikistan's United Tajik Opposition (UTO) and Hizb-Ul-Tahrir (HT) shares

the common objective to overthrow the ruling elite and establish Islamist regimes in all the Central Asian states. US government had included the IMU in its list of terrorist organization in the year 2000. President Bush in his national address on September 20, 2001, identified the IMU links with the Al-Qaeda and announced the intentions of the coalition to turn the heat on them once the Afghan campaign is over.[27]

2. The Central Asian states expect from the US, extension of diplomatic and political support to their repressive regimes and restrain from raising the issues like, suppression of political opponents, human rights violations and limiting civil liberties. Central Asian states have adopted very oppressive policies to curb any kind of political opposition. Human Rights and democracy activists argue that Karimov's regime in Uzbekistan is responsible for human rights violations, jailing the innocent and peaceful Islamists in the name of suppressing Islamic militancy. Similarly, the governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are also following the Uzbekistan's lead in criminalizing the peaceful expression of religious belief.

Until the war against terrorism started, human rights organization and US government officials had openly and harshly criticised the Uzbek regime for its extensive human rights abuses. The cordial engagement with US after September 11 has however, silenced these critics. Further, the ruling parties in the Central Asian states have intensified the suppression on the opposition party. A citing example is that of the Uzbek President, Islam Karimov, who in a referendum held in January 2002 has again extended his Presidential term till December 2007,[28] and the US has not objected to it. Similar developments are taking place in other states, in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan many opposition leaders holding key official position were arrested on the charges of abuse of power.

3. The promise of economic aid was an equally compelling motive for supporting the US campaign against terrorism. The economic conditions of these countries were in appalling state and were in dire need of economic aid, to recover from their Soviet days and post-Soviet distress. The US pledged \$125 million unconditional assistance to Tajikistan, while \$14 million had already been injected into the Kyrgyz economy.[29] It was also expected that US could influence the international financial institutions like World Bank and IMF to provide more loans and aid to those republics. The construction of oil and gas pipeline from CAS to outer world is likely to benefit both the US and the Central Asian states. The pipeline from Central Asia that traverses Afghanistan to the Gulf would bring revenue, employment and training to both the Afghans and the people of Central Asia.[30]

US Military Presence and the Responses from Russia, China and Iran

Russian Entanglement

In the wake of September 11, Russian President, Vladimir Putin, surprised many by joining the US-led war on global terrorism, offering to share intelligence, opening air corridors for humanitarian flights and lining up the Central Asian states to provide base facilities to the US-led coalition forces. Putin's government and bureaucracy argued that the US military presence in Central Asian states is a boon for Russia, providing Moscow with a cost free, increased security apparatus vis-à-vis unstable states along with its vulnerable southern Franks. It is to be noted that

after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, both Russia and US had several parallel interests in Central Asia and the Caspian Caucasus region. These included, containing the threat of Islamic militants, terrorism, check on nuclear proliferation and the spread of small arms and drug trafficking.

The war on terrorism made these common perceptions even stronger than before. The US has begun to treat Putin as partner, and wanted to integrate Russia with the Western multilateral security and economic organisations like NATO and WTO, which would confer Moscow a new identity.[31]

The Russian's threat perception regarding proliferation of biological terrorism in Central Asia has also to some extent been normalized with the cooperation of US. The US is working with Uzbekistan government on way to neutralize the biological agents such as anthrax responsible for biological terrorism. The US-led military campaign against terrorism in Afghanistan has provided leverage for Russia to achieve their objectives in Chechnya. In terms of economic benefits, Russia expects accession to the WTO, debt restructuring, and greater direct foreign investment.

However, after the constitution of Hamid Karzai government in Afghanistan, hardliners in Moscow have started expressing resentment and apprehension about a prolonged American presence in the region. Furthermore, the issue of pipeline has led to bone of contention between the two, US wants to lay pipelines bypassing Russia; while Russia wants the Pipelines to pass through its own territory. The Russian reaction at the American intention to setting up permanent military bases in its Central Asian backyard found expression in Russian state of Duma's Speaker Genadii Seleznev warning in Kazakhstan's capital Astana in January 2002. Seleznev said "I think that Presidents, governments and Parliament members will very carefully analyse what the status of the foreign army units expected to be deployed in Kyrgyzstan or in Uzbekistan will be and how they will behave in Tajikistan, on which legal grounds. They will be deployed, for which period of time, etc. These of course are all issues to which we cannot remain indifferent. CIS countries that are members of the collective security treaty, including those that I just mentioned can not take a single decision without consulting each other. We do not wish to see permanent US bases appear here in the Central Asian region"³² In an interview with the magazine Kommasant-Vlast on June 11, 2002, Russian foreign minister, Igor Ivanov made an unprecedented demand for the US to withdraw military from the region within a set period.[33] The Communist and Conservative nationalist elements who do not favour any shifts in the traditional Russian policy assert that the continued US support for Baku-Ceyhan pipeline that bypass Russia, is quite a disturbing and an alarming factor in the emerging geopolitics of the region.[34]

Russian response to the long term US military deployment in Central Asia and the geopolitical changes in the region is quite confused and not yet certain. While on 20th March 2002, speaking at a meeting with the leading staff of the Defence Ministry, President Putin stressed that Russia should promptly react to the serious geopolitical changes from the viewpoint of the armed forces.[35] However, Putin's April 18th 2002, state of the Union address before the Federal Assembly did not reflect any concern over these geopolitical changes. In his address Putin stressed the need to ensure peace and stability in the world and stated "to attain these goals, we

are taking part in the creation of a broad general system of security, and maintaining dialogue with the US and working to change the quality of our relations with NATO”.[36] To face the US challenge in the Central Asian region, Russia is trying to consolidate its relations with Central Asian states, on the one hand, and trying to foster strategic partnership with China on the other.

Chinese Concern

China is another important actor because of its geographic proximity and its economic, political, and strategic stakes in the region. The opening of US base in the region has done little to change Chinese plans or to challenge their influence in the region. The war on terrorism has helped in advancing some of the important Chinese foreign policy goals like the eradication of the political threat posed by Uighurs and other Turkic Muslim minorities living in Western China. After the September 11 attack the Chinese government induced the US to include Uighur groups to its lists of foreign terrorist organisations. It has been reported that since September 11, the crackdown on the Uighurs has intensified, and the Chinese government portray the Uighurs’ political dissent as terrorism and justify its oppressive policies against the Uighurs.

However, the fact of the matter is that China like Russia is equally circumspect of the extended US military presence in the Central Asian region, and considers the US presence as a hindrance to its strategic objectives of exerting influence in the region. The Manas base in Kyrgyzstan, for instance, is only 200 miles from the border with China’s western most province of Xinjiang. The nuclear testing facility at Lop Nor is within easy reach of US air strikes. There is a growing concern among the Chinese that the US ‘war on terrorism’ while supporting the Afghan war, is trying to contain China from exerting its strategic influence in the region.

To contain and counter the US influence no significant headway has been made between Russia and China in the region. However, the foreign ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) met in Beijing in January 2002, endorsed a call for neutral Afghanistan and opposed arbitrary expansion of the global war on terrorism to Iraq, Iran and North Korea described by President Bush as “axis of evil states”[37] was a major defensive on their part.

To oppose US hegemony in Central Asia, the Sino-Russian response strategy prefers the transformation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), created in 1996 as a forum for border demilitarization and trade promotion, into a regional security structure to conduct ‘Joint Anti-terrorist Operation’. On June 7, 2002 the President of Russia, China and four Central Asian states signed a charter transforming the SCO security bloc into a full fledged international organization with a permanent secretariat based in Beijing. From China’s perspective, as all the Central Asian states (except neutral Turkmenistan) already belong to the SCO, this would be viewed as a direct attempt to undermine the rationale for US security presence in this region. Both Moscow and Beijing seem to be keen to carry New Delhi along with them in their struggle to prevent the establishment of the US global hegemony under the cover of fighting international terrorism. During the New Delhi visit of Russian Foreign Minister, Igor Ivanov aptly made a remark on the possibilities of creating a multi-polar international system through forging trilateral cooperation between India, China, and Russia. During the Chinese Prime Minister, Zhu Rongji visit to India in January 2002, the issue of bilateral cooperation between India and China and about elimination of terrorism in the region also discussed.

Iran and the Impact of US Military Presence in Central Asia

After 9/11, Iran cooperated with US against terrorism in an anticipation for better relations with US. However, the combination of an enhanced US military presence on Iran's Eastern frontiers and continued hostile US-Iranian relations exacerbated Iran's feeling of encirclement. Though Iran did not overtly support US military action in Afghanistan, but was pleased with the removal of the Taliban regime. It also played a constructive role at the Bonn conference in planning the post-Taliban government of Afghanistan. These developments raised hopes that the US-Iranian cooperation in Afghanistan could lead to an improvement in their overall bilateral relations. These expectation, however, were dashed when President George W. Bush, included Iran in the "Axis of Evil", together with Iraq and North Korea during his January 29 2002, state of the Union address.[38]

The hardening of the US position towards Iran, the growing US military presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia heightened Iran's security concern. After the failure of Five Caspian littoral states to reach an agreement on delimitation of the Caspian Sea at their April 2002 presidential Summit in Ashgabat, the Iranian President, Mohammad Khatami toured Central Asian capitals to discuss two issues; energy routes and the presence of US in the region. Meanwhile, Washington accused Teheran of supporting terrorist groups in the Middle East and seeking Nuclear Weapons. President Bush in his January 2002 state of the Union address stressed that "Iran's aggressively pursuing weapons of mass destruction and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom".[39]

Conclusion

Within the described parameters of the "great game", what are the US strategic and economic interests? Washington has so far failed to transform its responses to regional challenges into a coherent strategy. Its policy towards Central Asia during the decade prior to Afghanistan war was marked by a clear lack of direction. Global war on terrorism has made Central Asia significant for the US and US is adopting a cautious policy now. US is quite concerned with the possibility of Islamic fundamentalism rising as a major force in coming days. Repressive regimes and economic under-development are ample reasons for the popularity of radical Islamist force in the region. Thus, Central Asia is a major crucible for the implementation of a multi-dimensional US policy aimed at political and economic transformation. Washington has the economic and military might to reach this complicated goal. As because US has vital interests in Central Asia, it is more concerned that the region should not become the breeding ground of civil war, nuclear proliferation, radical Islamic movements, and the target of a resurgent Russian imperialism.

US has little leverage, however, to directly influence events in these sovereign states. Therefore, its primary focus has so far been damage control, preventing existing problems from escalating into crises that might engage Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan. To ensure these goals, US policy makers are evolving their strategy in Central Asia which would aim at (a) denying any country (such as Russia and China) or group of countries (such as Shanghai Group) the ability to dominate the region to the exclusion of US presence, (b) preventing the transformation of Central Asia into a base for radical Islamic forces, (c) facilitating American companies access to

the region's natural resources and markets, (d) eradicating the drug trade and its trafficking from the region, (e) encouraging and supporting the development of civil society, and transparent market economy in the region. Though oil and gas and the pipeline politics may be the strategic drive for the US military base in Central Asia, it was the threat emanating from international terrorism that will continue to fuel US drive to maintain its military presence in Central Asia after 11 September.

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