
Changing Dynamics Of Kazakhstan-U.S. Relations

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Introduction

The pace of the global change has quickened dramatically since 1989 till 2012, when the dismantling of the Berlin wall, together with profound political transformation in Central-Eastern Europe, signaled the collapse of the Soviet Empire. The events of Central Asian States in the post-independence can be divided into two phases: a) the interlude before the September 11 events in USA and b) the interlude after the events¹ (After 9/11, the Bush administration described this conflict as a *Global War on Terrorism*). The first stage was largely one of apprehension about too close an involvement of the USA in the region, while the second is characterized by an understanding on the part of Central Asian republics, Kazakhstan in particular, that direct long term and

even very close involvement of the USA in the region is predictable, and some even see in it an opportunity of promoting their interests. After independence, all the Central Asian States professed willingness for good relations with the world's states and were eager to join numerous international and regional bodies, ranging from western organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)² and NATO's coordinating council and Partnership for Peace Programme (PFP) to the third World organizations such as the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and Organization of the Islamic Countries (OIC)³. Relations with the East and West on equal footing were pursued as means of demonstrating the independence of the new states.

In the initial period soon after its independence, however, Kazakhstan

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faced immense difficulties in nation building of the country⁴. It had to, for all practical purposes, carve out its position from the debris left by the Soviet system, the new state structures along with establishing a new legal and juridical framework and a new institutional infra structure to survive as an independent country. With the country getting independence from the erstwhile colony, as it always happens, it came under tremendous pressure in making Kazakhstan independent in all forms. But the question was which country could be a reliable partner in their nation building process. In due of course of time, it was realized that the entire work or at least to a major extent could be done by none other than the United States.⁵

At that point of time, the Russians were of little help because they themselves were busy in keeping their house in order. It was this realization that made Kazakhstan understand the country's leadership should look forward to the western help. What better than U.S in the entire nation building process⁶ could be? It was only the United States which could help Kazakhstan with all required resources, expertise, technologies, influences in the international financial institutions, scientific and institutional resources

to participate directly or train the needed manpower to take the country out of the chaos and anarchy.

Theoretical Aspects of Relations

Contextualizing the relationship between Kazakhstan and the U.S, the master key is the concept of interest defined in terms of power. This approach focuses attention on the units which remain the principle actors in international politics- the state. In that sense, it is called the realist approach. This is so because, it emphasizes the importance of national interest as viewed by the statesman of a particular nation in concrete terms. For the obvious reasons Kazakhstan wanted progress and development for the nation, U.S desired to extend sphere of influence in this part of the world.

In the realm of politics, even the civil society wanted the betterment of Kazakhstan and progress. Underlining imperative factors much needed to the contemporary civil society⁷ of Kazakhstan, the tangible and viable partner was U.S. The world had witnessed the disappearance of the bipolar power and the emergence of the United States on the world horizon. So, against this background, the relationship started between U.S and

Kazakhstan immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The great challenge for the leadership was to move to create diplomatic, political, economic, social ties with all the countries including United States and the Western European countries. At the same time, it was also very clear, in spite of USSR breakdown⁸; it was a great force to reckon with in the region.

Another problem related to the currency conversion⁹. The decision of the reformist Russian government to de-control most retail and whole sale prices in January 1992 had to be followed within a ruble area that continued until mid 1993. In absence of any competitive market price (which had begun under doctrine of *Perestroika*) was quickly exacerbated. There appeared the disparity between the common man's income generation and the wealth distribution.¹⁰

And yet another problem was, the price hike which was fuelled by rapid expansion of money followed by rapid supply as governments resorted to monitoring fiscal deficits, occasioned by the withdrawal of the external transfers that were part of Soviet financial operations by the restructuring of forms of tax and the tax base, and temporarily by greater spending requirements. There was

an inevitable lag before a rudimentary domestic financial market and some access to external lenders and to the international financial institutions started to enable deficits to be financed through borrowing.

Finally, the downturn shock in which the economy shrank as former *planned* internal and external relations were liquidated more rapidly than their replacement by market linkages. Investment plummeted and the utilization of labour and the capacity significantly diminished. A considerable emigration of Slavs¹¹ contributed to productivity decline.

Regional Actors

Though there are number of regional powers, on the basis of which Kazakhstan could have looked forward to, but they are almost incapable to support the case of Kazakhstan¹². This is due to the fact that they themselves are not capable enough to make their better presence and revamp Kazakhstan through investments needed to retool, revamp or market these resources. Amidst all these situations, Kazakh leadership underlined that the United States had a role to play in drawing the required investments and other resources to take Kazakhstan out of

the current mess— financial, human expertise, technological and economy of the country.

Regional Impact on the Relations

In the wake of 9/11, there had been apprehensions in Washington and amongst a number of international strategic Central Asian scholars that the region of the Central Asian countries (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan) would come under the direct influence of regional impacts. This article gives an insight into the regional issues influencing the area which include: Theocratic resurgence, ethnic factors, internal factors such as economic determinants and external factors such as from West Asia or South Asia in influencing the events, geo-strategic factors, etc.

Religious Revival

With the disappearance of bipolarity from the world, the CARs¹³ or Central Asian Republics witnessed the resurgence of Islamic revival. On theocratic plane, the revivalism could be attributed to the era of long suppression of Islam under USSR. In Soviet Empire, Islam was de-intellectualized including its symbols, norms, and traditions. This

suppression of religion of Islam kept the vast populace of the society without the influence of the understanding of the tenets of the faith.

However, the situation started changing in the post-dissolution of the Soviet Empire and people began reconfirming their faith and exploring ways to reach to their roots with theology. It was an individual endeavor to practice the lost religion when they got their independence. They had every right to move to re-affirm the faith,¹⁴ though it was branded as a kind of resurgence in the whole of Central Asia. Later with the broader understanding it was discovered that it was merely the assertion of their personal faith without any state support. But one thing was important to underline that after their independence, Central Asian leaders started re-educating the society about the significance of the faith, hadith, and Quran¹⁵. It was in this context that the revivalism of Islam made an impact on the cultural heritage and national identity.

Analysts underscore, that the influence of personal faith and practices were not merely confined to a particular area, rather to the entire region of Central Asia. Kazakhstan was not an exception in this context. So, immediately after the

independence, the question was how the revivalism of Islam¹⁶ is going to affect the Kazakhstan–U.S relations. Media in the West had already started propagating and had generated enough fear-psychosis in this regard. Not only this, even before these countries got independence, the West was crying foul. They started with the assumption that the entire area would turn into a den of fundamentalism. It was argued that the impact of this fundamentalism¹⁷ would be far and wide which would have wider and global ramifications and the very interests of the US would suffer. Therefore, U.S had great apprehensions as to how to tackle the menace that had crept in the system. Particularly on the aspect of radicalization of the religion and the greater manifestations, this would impress the Islamic Republic of Iran¹⁸ and other forms of Islamic extremism might start showing their presence.

Till date, with the exception of largely misunderstood case of Tajikistan, the revivalism of Islam in Central Asian Republic has rather been very moderate or is on the waning side. The skepticism of the West before and since 1991 till 2009 projects that the area of Central Asian Republics is under heavy influence of the extremism and the population is plagued by the influence of Islam.

In reality, much depends as to how the respective governments of those countries are pursuing the policies through the state apparatus. Political uncertainty widely prevails in the whole of area of CAS¹⁹. Political structures remain delicate, irrespective of the formal structure of the government since 1991. Some of the states are making progress, but no state in the region has as yet managed to create a political culture that offers effective pluralism to the many ethnic, tribal groups, and ethno religious groups while implementing meaningful enforcement of the rule of law and respect for human rights²⁰. All the competing ideologies of the post-independent era in Central Asian Republics have failed so far including Marxism, capitalism and socialism. These have not provided lasting political cohesion, and given the development an adequate momentum.

Most of the vast area of the CAS has turned back to traditional social structures and religion. During independence, the specter of religion could have been highlighted to serve certain sectional interests but today in 2009, many of the Islamic movements²¹, groups and political parties which could have taken the role of providing educational, social, health and other useful services in the society, but have not been much

successful. In the contemporary global backdrop and the relationship between Kazakhstan and U.S, the extremism could be a factor but not a substantive one as in the case of other parts of the world where U.S is fighting war against terrorism to protect its interests.

The Central Asian region has not been able to construct meaningful political institutions. Even in most countries the ruler or one-party system dominates political parties which rarely offer open competition. It does not mean that politics does not take indigenous forms through tribal, religious, or other civil society institutions, but it often lacks the institutions necessary for long-term stability. In spite the fact of almost two-decades of independence of these Central Asian Countries, still, free speech, the rule of law, real political parties and the basic security and free from terror ("We are partners in the global war on terrorism²²") that should be part of human rights are often limited or missing. These do affect the peaceful relations between Kazakhstan and U.S, though the case of Kazakhstan is tangibly better than the other states in the region of Central Asia.

Kazakhstan's Significance

From the U.S perspective,

Kazakhstan is a strategic partner for a variety of reasons in the relationship between the U.S and Kazakhstan since its independence till the Barack Obama administration²³ of 2009. Because of energy-rich resources, and the involvement of the United States energy companies have generated a good deal of interest. Kazakhstan is geo-strategically located and hence, turns out to be a mission-critical base for the on-going operation against the war on terrorism.

The very strategic location²⁴ makes Kazakhstan a transit point for numerous reasons, like organised crime, the narcotics trade, transnational threats, human trafficking which are great concern to the United States. Thus, the U.S has moved ahead towards a better cooperation with Kazakhstan on these fronts.

United States underlines the significance of the stability²⁵ in Kazakhstan and the whole region which is in the interest within and without the Central Asia. The U.S believes that a stable Kazakhstan would prevent it from becoming a breeding ground for fanaticism. The U.S would not like the greater presence and influence of Russia and China²⁶ in the internal domains of the Kazakhstan territory. However, Kazakhstan's domestic policy

compulsions dictate that it needs to keep a fine balance among the various contending forces in the region to serve its national interests. Whatever the case is, the geo-strategic compulsions and national interests²⁷ of the United States dictate that in their relationship, both Washington and Kazakhstan should take into account other factors which are in their interest.

Economic Relations

U.S companies have invested²⁸ billions of dollars in Kazakhstan since 1991-2009. The prime areas of the U.S investment have been oil and gas, electrical energy sectors, trades, and telecommunications. Kazakhstan has ensured the conducive environment for the investment, despite some small problems like arbitrary enforcement laws. Precisely, since 1994 and 1996, a U.S.-Kazakhstan Bilateral Investment Treaty and Treaty on the Avoidance of Dual Taxation have been in place. In 2001 and 2002, *Houston Initiative*,²⁹ was taken as United States established the U.S.-Kazakhstan Energy Partnership and entered into Business Development Partnership³⁰.

The US has to ensure that business is done and is maintained in the right perspective. The sections 402 and 409 of the U.S. 1974 Trade Act requires

that President to submit bi-annually a report to the Congress on stipulated compliance with the Act's understanding and freedom of emigration provisions by those nations of the world along with Kazakhstan, that testifies the criteria of the Trade Act's Jackson-Vanik Amendment³¹. However, bilateral trade has risen from modest 87% to \$939.3 million in 2002, and it surged tangibly in the domain of telecommunication equipment and export of civilian aircrafts. Even after 2002 to the ongoing 2009, the pace of the economic relations is a continuous process. In spite of the global recessions underway, the bilateral relations in economic and trade terms have been on the upward swing and efforts been to continue the pace.

Environmental Issues

Like many other contemporary global concerns³² on the environment and climate, which the international community is facing, the Summit in Copenhagen, 2009 maintained that Kazakhstan has to address its environmental issues with the United States and others. To decipher environment related issues, Kazakhstan has identified some major ecological problems adjacent to its borders. This includes the protection of the fragile Caspian ecosystem, remediation of the

*Semipalatinsk*³³ nuclear testing range, desertification, pollution, clean-up of the Baykonur launching facility etc.

In the year 1999, Kazakhstan became a signatory to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES)³⁴. To address the problems of environmental and water management of the Syr Darya River, Kazakhstan along with some basin states have sought assistance from USAID and Central Asian Republics established the 1998 Framework Agreement on the application of Water and Energy Resources of the Syr Darya Basin³⁵.

In order to deal with the growing environmental problems, the United States and the European Union worked together with the Ministry of Environmental Protection to establish an independent and nonpolitical Regional Environmental Center (REC)³⁶ in Almaty in 2001. The purpose of the mission of the REC is to reinforce the support to civil society by generating public awareness and participation in environmental decision making among the Central Asian Republics. To make more sustainable efforts, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Ministry of Environment Protection signed a Memorandum of Understanding to assist the REC with

funding for its grants mission.

The U.S Objectives

With the Obama having won Nobel Peace Prize³⁷ 2009, the strategic discourse in White House would be interesting to watch by the international strategic analysts as to how the U.S moves take shape in the Central Asian Region in general and Kazakhstan in particular. There are a host of issues like illicit nuclear material, stemming the flow of drugs and small arms illicitly crossing borders³⁸ which pose a challenge in Central Asia. More than anything else, the region of Central Asia is full of natural resources particularly in energy. The U.S. favours a new oil pipeline from Baku, Azerbaijan to Ceyhan³⁹. This has given rise to the speculation that U.S. is more interested in region's oil than anything else.

Thus the U.S. is killing *two birds with one stone*; tackling terrorism while securing energy resources, so expressed by Kleveman⁴⁰, author of *The Great Game: Blood and Oil in Central Asia*. Yet other strategic experts view that the presence of the United States in Central Asia is aimed at more in curbing the influence of Kremlin in the post Soviet Central Asia than anything else. The prime objective of the

Obama administration is to stop the neo-imperial emergence in Eurasia, asserts the Central Asian expert, Stephen J. Blank at the United States Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute⁴¹. The same apprehension is being expressed by the Central Asian leaders who are accusing the American regime of looking for a permanent physical presence in the whole area for the motives unrelated to its war on terrorism. More recently, Karimov, the Uzbek President, said that the U.S. has "far-reaching geopolitical plans, the very objective of which is to change the balance of strategic depth and dominate the Central Asian region." However, the U.S. officials do not endorse this view.

Af-Pak Policy and Central Asia

Obama's Afghanistan and Pakistan policy might be primarily intended for these two countries, yet in long term, it will have its ramification in Central Asia or Kazakhstan, besides West Asia. But before that it will be very significant as to how best Taliban and Al-Qaeda are rooted out from the these areas. Already a kind of backlash⁴² is in the process against the Pakistani establishment and the incidents in different parts of Pakistan in the form of suicides and bombings are taking

place. The tackling of these forces is becoming increasingly difficult. Needless to add, these were the same forces fighting against Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Now they have turned towards their own home turf, definitely, it will spill over to Central Asia and Kazakhstan, in whatever form it appears. In between renewed battle between Pakistani security forces and the Taliban fighters have triggered an exodus from Swat Valley with the provincial government fearing displacement of around five lakh people from the region. The very nefarious designs of the extremists. Geo-strategic analysts⁴³ view that Taliban serve no body's purpose, except their own.

American analysts feel the biggest threat to them for achieving American interest in strategic areas including Kazakhstan is not only from the economic down turn of the world but from the extremists. With the dissolution of the Soviet Empire and the emergence of the Central Asian Countries, the growing fundamentalism in these countries was being projected as the biggest challenge for the interest of Americans in that part of the world. So, starting from Uzbekistan to other Central Asian countries the U.S. and its allies try to hype and blow the issue out of proportion. It brought a lot of allies on her side.

The American base in *Manas of Kyrgyzstan*⁴⁴ serves this purpose, so that society remains safe and does not fall in the vicious circle of terrorism. The eviction notice of *Manas air base* could be a temporary setback for the Obama administration still the U.S has no problem in finding the solution of eviction. More than anything else, America and allies hold the view that the extremist forces are to be taken head on.

Conclusion

Kazakhstan and U.S Relations have been on the pragmatic level⁴⁵ on an international contemporary global canvas that sets the national interests of a nation within the domain of the political realm. Since 1991 till the ongoing Barack Obama -, the relationship between Kazakhstan and U.S has touched the new horizons. The U.S being the predominant power in the existing world template has more prowess and freedom of maneuver than ever before. Therefore, without losing the tool of diplomacy the United States has undertaken initiatives for the healthy integration of these Central Asian states into the global system. Summarily, in the Central Asian Republics in general, and Kazakhstan in particular, U.S. policy has been to optimize long-range strategic objectives by forging

greater and strategic relations with Kazakhstan. But the current policy of Af-Pak of Obama does have bearing on Kazakhstan and Central Asian Countries.

The U.S. is heavily engaged in the region of Af-Pak. Its engagement there and in Central Asian states is a long-term endeavor. The stationing of unipolar power in the region in and around Central Asia has a considerable bearing on the development of the Global War on Terrorism. The U.S. foresees national interest in Eurasia; the maintenance of access to airspace and territory in the heart of Asia and the alternative source of energy in this region and stressing on democratic institutional process. Amidst all these objectives, the Russia and China view the presence of U.S. a great challenge to the existing security and developmental interest in Central Asia.

The neighboring powers perceive any move of U.S. in the region with suspicion. They believe that the prime objective of the United States under both Bush and now Obama administration is nothing less than the dominance of the area on one pretext or the other.

The U.S projects explicitly democracy, human rights, and a host

of other issues; the main focus of U.S. appears to bring the Central Asian states into the mainstream of the comity of nations by promoting economic process, institutional changes essential to modern societies of the world and in conformity with the twenty-first century establishments. The long term objective seems to be the counter terrorism cooperation, ensuring the sovereignty and making sure that they are independent from extraneous factors of impositions undesirable for them. They appreciate the very fact that Taliban is one of the important factors in Af-Pak region which can thwart the very national interest of the West in Central Asia, thus, making an onslaught on the very greater strategic interests right from Pakistan to the Central Asian States and other areas of vital interest.⁴⁶

The United States projected strategy since 1991-2009 has been the

overall development of the region by maintaining its heavy presence in the area of Central Asian Republics, particularly in Kazakhstan and Af-Pak region, so that it will be able to maintain strict vigilance over Iran's intended move and cut it to size as and when required.

The U.S. intends to make sure, by taking head on the Af-Pak region, and make its strong presence in the area of Central Asia to cherish long-established vital geo-strategic interest in forestalling the rise of Eurasian empire that could challenge the hegemony of the United States. Therefore, the current fight is not confined to the Af-Pak region; rather it transcends its boundary. Finally, the relationship between Kazakhstan and U.S has been on the bilateral understanding of the long term geo-strategic contemporary discourse with overall interests under consideration. ■

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