

# China's Presence in Central Asia and Political Implications for India



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## Abstract

Central Asia is an area of strategic importance to India, not only on account of its geographical proximity and India's cultural and historical links with the region but also because of an ever-growing demand for energy and natural resources. India's common concern with Central Asian state is to check spread of terrorism from Pakistan and Afghanistan into the region as collapse of Soviet Union led to a strategic vacuum in Central Asia. Many regional and major powers attempted to fill this vacuum. China and India also embarked to enhance their strategic presence in the Central Asian State. China seeks to check the growing hegemony of USA in the region on the one hand and on the other hand she keeps an eye on India. China is also suspicious about Indo-US alliance and India's strategic partnership with US allies like Japan. Moreover, China is concerned about U.S. support for an expanded Indian role in Central Asia so that she can any time check the rising hegemony of china in the region through India. India's ambitions potentially clash more directly with those of China. Despite the urgency for India, if not Central Asia, of strengthening those ties, India is failing to keep pace with China. China has far outpaced India throughout the region, regarding both energy acquisitions and the building of a long-distance transportation, trade and infrastructure network despite India's rising wealth and power. Defensive realism suggests that India should be very prudent in pursuing its interest in Central Asia and its presence in the region should not be detrimental to its own security. India should build confidence with China and pursue independent foreign policy towards Central Asia.

### Aim of Study

Present study aims to understand the prospects and challenges of China's presence in Central Asia for India and tries to explore rational choices available to India in engaging with China.

### Hypothesis

Indo-US alliance and India's strategic partnership with USA creates security dilemma for China and danger for its hegemonic aspirations in the region. Political realism suggests that through pursuance of independent foreign policy towards Central Asia, India can build confidence with China.

### Methodology and Research Design

The proposed study is based on descriptive, historical and analytical method. The paper has been organised as follows: Part-1 sets out strategic significance of Central Asia as a region and a brief historical background of India's presence in Central Asia. Part-II provides an analytical explanation of the perceived national interest and participation of USA, India and China in the region. Part-III evaluates Challenges and prospects of India- US alliance and rise of China in the region. Conclusion and Suggestions are furnished in part Part-IV.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, India, China, USA, Terrorism, Strategic Region, Energy Resources

### Introduction

Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) is an area of strategic importance to India, not only on account of its geographical proximity and India's cultural and historical links with the region but also because of an ever-growing demand for energy and natural resources. Prior to Cold War India's contact with Central Asia was largely mediated through Russia and also during Cold War, systemic structural constraints compel India to maintain good relations with Soviet Union. India signed historical Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, friendship and Cooperation that allowed her to maintain privileged link with Central Asia. After the collapse of Soviet Union, Central Asia witnessed huge instability

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due to ethnic conflicts, economic crisis and other domestic problems. Poor governance and failed policies also increase the danger that religious fundamentalist groups may radicalize and be attracted to other forms of extremism. Collapse of Soviet Union led to a strategic vacuum in Central Asia. Many regional and major powers attempted to fill this vacuum. Apart from Russia, US also enhanced its military and economic role in the region. Though Russia had the legitimate responsibility to see security and stability in the region US did not lose any opportunity to enter into the region.

## Discussion

### Hegemony of USA in Central Asia

Strategically it is in the interest of the US to secure its presence in the region and make it indispensable while claiming its presence is needed for greater regional security and to deter Russia from entertaining or engaging in territorial revisionism to recover lost territories or to intimidate its neighbours. Even NATO's expansion to eastward was justified in the name of security and stability of former Soviet Union's sphere of Influence<sup>1</sup>. U.S. still believes that her continued economic and political engagement with region is needed. Neither Moscow nor Beijing is in a position to address the regional problems and sources of domestic instability. Moreover, Washington's withdrawal from Afghanistan in future may again create a strategic vacuum and Washington will have to find a stable equilibrium between abandoning Central Asia to its demons and engaging in counterproductive balance-of-power games with Russia and China<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand US will make it sure that in her absence its allies sustain the gains it made in the last decade. The U.S encouraged link of the Central Asian nations with NATO, the EU, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and India. Although all five central Asian republics are part of NATO's Partnership for Peace (four of them joined in 1994 and Tajikistan did so in 2002), the Central Asian Regimes feel that they need to balance security cooperation with NATO with that of Russia (the Collective Security Treaty Organisation) and Russia-China (the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation), but at the same time they exploit NATO's and the America's dependence on keeping the Northern Distribution Network (a series of commercially-based logistical arrangements connecting Baltic and Caspian ports with Afghanistan via Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. In addition to NDN, Iran and China are also considered possible transit states.) alive for troops and supplies to Afghanistan<sup>3</sup>.

Central Asia time and again made it clear to US that they will not support its promotion of western style democracies in the region. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan 1996, Uzbekistan joined in 2001) in July 2005 urged all foreign forces to set a time frame for withdrawal of their bases from the territory of its member states<sup>4</sup>. The alliance's move appeared to be an attempt to curb U.S. influence in a region that Russia regards as historically part of its

sphere and in which China seeks a dominant role because of its extensive energy resources. In 2006, US achieved its most important strategic goal of building energy and transport corridor, and the oil pipeline from Baku, Azerbaijan, via Tbilisi Georgia to Ceyhan in Turkey, supplying oil to Europe that avoid Russia and reduce its control on the Central Asian oil. The BTC is the second longest (1,768 km, following only Russia's approximately 4,000 km Druzhba pipeline) and one of the most expensive pipelines in the world, costing \$4.6 billion. The pipeline began operations in July 2006 and its capacity is 1 million barrels of oil per day. The US government's strong support for the pipeline projects goes beyond merely assuring energy security. The pipelines are viewed as strategic projects that are critical to US national security interests.<sup>5</sup> Again Russia considers The BTC as one of the most controversial and politicized energy pipelines aimed to curb its role in the region. US also encourages the states to develop new ties with south Asia e.g. India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. This will give way to 'Greater Central Asia' and treat South Asia and Central Asia as a single unit. Moreover it will provide US an access to Central Asia through its allies.

### China's aim to Attain Dominance in the Region

China began to take serious notice of Central Asia in the late 1990's, through trade, energy deals, transport infrastructure and gradual enlargement of the scope of the SCO to include both security and economics. China also felt threatened by religious fundamentalists elements in Afghanistan because of its vulnerabilities in Xinjiang and its problems with Muslim Uighurs. In a broader strategic framework, U.S. intervention against the Taliban regime coincided with growing Russian and Chinese security concerns. The main factor behind the Sino-Russian cooperation continues to be the shared objective of reducing U.S influence. China still needs Russian arms technologies, and natural resources, while as Russia needs China to balance the west. China also realized that US presence in Central Asia is a part of a specific policy design to constrain China's rising power. Securing its border and neighbouring states is of prime importance for China. Cordial relations with Central Asian Muslim nations will help China address its security concerns regarding separatist Muslim movements in Xinjiang led by Uyghurs. Taliban is active and trying to re-focus their interest on the region after the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan as a Taliban attack on the Afghan parliament on 22 June, 2015 ended after all seven militants were killed<sup>6</sup>. NATO and its partners are committed to provide financial support to sustain the Afghan forces until the end of 2017<sup>7</sup>. Many in Beijing are alarmed by the range of challenges Central Asia faces. From the Chinese point of view, the NATO's complete absence may pose numerous risks in the region from both security and economic aspects. At the same time China wants to tell USA that it wants Asian region for itself as USA is exercising control over Western hemisphere.

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## India's National Interest in the Region

India had been a late comer in the Central Asia as it had to deal with economic problems at home and wait for a takeoff in its economy. Rapidly modernizing market economy created an energy deficit in India which India sought to fill with India-US alliance, import from west and Central Asia. Large reserves of hydrocarbons, oil and natural gas in Central Asia increase its strategic importance and India also looked for mutually beneficial cooperative relationship. Proposed visit of prime minister of India, Narendra Modi, a trip to five Central Asian countries in July, also signifies the importance of huge natural resources including hydrocarbon and uranium in Central Asia.<sup>8</sup> Strategically, also Central Asia occupies great significance for India and it is looking for some common platform to engage with theregion. India's common concern with Central Asian state is to check spread of terrorism from Pakistan and Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a strategic bridge that links Central Asia and South Asia. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have borders with Afghanistan, Pakistan to the east and south and Iran lies to its west, India shares no border with Central Asia. With the control of Afghanistan comes the control of the land routes between the Indian subcontinent and resource rich Central Asia potential corridor to Iran and as well as the Middle East. Thus, Stability and peace in Afghanistan, and for that matter Pakistan, are a geostrategic imperative<sup>9</sup>. India's security concerns focused above all on South Asia and it gladly accepted Russia as the sole guarantor of security and stability in Central Asia.

As India is failing to keep pace with China, its chances to achieve its national interest in the region are diminishing. It is evident from the fact that despite the importance of the so-called TAPI pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan and Pakistan to India, India is unable to materialize its interest. The Turkmenistan - Afghanistan - Pakistan - India (TAPI) pipeline took solid shape in May 2012, with the signing of gas sale and pricing agreements. Several geopolitical factors enabled the signing— America's solid support, given the desire to counter Iranian, Russian and Chinese influences and the New Silk Route Strategy for Afghanistan; This failure occurs even though the U.S. supports an expanded Indian role in Central Asia, and the American presence vastly enlarges the political, economic and military space available to India. India clearly needs a partner to be effective in Central Asia, while China may use Pakistan to cut India off from Afghanistan and Central Asia. While India claims to become a regional balancer, relationships with Pakistan, China, Russia, and the U.S. constrain its ambitions, which are best served under conditions of regional cooperation. As Beijing is also reportedly not opposed to India's entry into the SCO as part of its long-term policy. India, Iran, Pakistan, and Mongolia have been granted observer status in the SCO. If these countries decide to join as full members this could make the SCO the most important cooperation agreement in the eastern hemisphere. But India has already been drawn into

the U.S. regional power game through a slew of treaties and agreements that indicate a "long term" military and security alliance to contain China. Moreover, many scholars believe that Indian think-tank have difficulty in thinking and acting strategically, that is why India is unable to have any sound policy to engage with China and Pakistan. Pakistan provides the shortest and cheapest link to landlocked Central Asian states.

## Prospects and Challenges

China with the continuous economic growth and powerful military will become a regional power. A few analysts believe that China can rise peacefully and other predicts that a rising China and USA will engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential of war. As a regional hegemon in the western hemisphere, America will not bear a peer competitor, instead she will like the Asian region divided among several major powers, who will then compete with each other and not be in a position to focus on them. Thus after achieving regional dominance the US has gone to great lengths to prevent other great powers from controlling Asia and Europe. America will try to be only regional hegemon in the world. If china becomes a regional hegemon in Asia it will try to maximize the power gap between itself and its neighbours, especially Russia, Japan and India. Increasingly powerful china is also likely to try to push US military forces out of Asia. Beijing will prefer a military weak Japan and Russia as its neighbours as Canada and Mexico to USA. USA will work hard to contain China. China's neighbours are also sure to fear its rise and may join a US-led balancing coalition to check China's rise.<sup>10</sup>

Defensive realists also feel that in future China will look for opportunities to shift balance of power in its favour. Both the USA and China's neighbours will have to balance against China to keep it in check. Security competition will not disappear altogether from Asia as China grows more powerful but security competition may not be intense and China should be able to coexist peacefully with both USA and its neighbours. China may strategically avoid the creation of balancing coalition that can thwart its progress and even security. The presence of nuclear weapons is another cause of optimism. India, Russia and USA all have nuclear weapons and China is likely to act cautiously towards them. Nuclear weapons will be force for peace if China continues its rise. As its economy increasing with impressive pace China may avoid direct conflict and rely more on soft power<sup>11</sup>. China, that is why, is investing massively in security and strategic affairs within the SCO. Any destabilisation of the Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan could directly affect China's North West.

## Suggestions

Secure and stable Central Asia is in the India's interest and India should play a role of balancer so that no single power dominates the region. First prerequisite for this is to resolve border disputes with China and Pakistan. India may require US support in the region against religious fundamentalism but not against China. It is in the

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interest of all Asian countries to check rise of extremism and terrorism, especially after US withdrawal in 2014. India should work collectively with US, central Asia and China to deal with the menace. Implementation of the TAPI pipeline project is likely to create mutual interdependency and good relations with Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. To enhance economic cooperation with central Asia, India should use soft power, Confidence building measures (including the various strategic, defence, and economic dialogues) and active participation of Civil Society. Trade and energy import will require seeking direct transport access to Central Asia. A Greater Central Asia makes a good strategic sense. It is based on the premise that Central and South Asia can become, a single integrated unit committed to economic growth. Peaceful and stable Afghanistan is crucial for regional stability and India should continue with Afghanistan's reconstruction efforts to enhance its capacity to play a meaningful role in regional economic cooperation. China and India may be in a position to cooperate on energy. China has leading clean coal technology in the world. The government should issue a series of policy to set up energy efficient industries and serious researches should be conducted to use clean energy. The dynamics of energy markets are being increasingly determined by emerging economies, and India should work positively with SCO, ASEAN, and BRICS.

## Conclusion

China and India are two important regional powers. Any development involving their co-operation or rivalry will have profound impact on evolving strategic matrix of the region. India must ensure that its strategic partnership with USA must not create an imbalance in the region. Moreover, If the U.S. succeeds in controlling most of the energy resources, it will use this as an instrument of its external policy and make it inaccessible to others, That would make emerging powers like India most vulnerable. Analysts have identified that competition for scarce resources will become an inevitable source of conflict between

different nations in near future. Instability or conflict in one or more of the Central Asian states would have direct impact on China and India, as their economic interests depend on a stable security landscape. Political realism suggests that India must be prudent and independent in pursuing its Foreign Policy towards Asia.

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