

# RUSSIA'S POLICY TOWARDS CENTRAL ASIA IN POST-COLD WAR ERA

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## INTRODUCTION

The geopolitics of the Eurasian landmass was restructured with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the formation of newly independent states. This also led to the security objectives and political discourse being redefined in the post bipolar world. The fledgling states, on the other hand, formulated their respective foreign policies in order to adapt to the new world order.

Parallel with the event of disintegration of the Soviet Union, the countries of Central Asia became independent entities and occupied a pivotal status in international affairs with their rich natural resources, post the 9/11 terror attacks. Central Asia-Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are situated at the cross-junction of cultures and civilisations. Since ancient times, the important travel and trade route connecting Asia with Europe—known as the Silk Route—passed through this region.

Central Asia also shares its border with Russia. Hence, the geographical proximity and the possession of Central Asia and Transcaucasia brought Moscow very close to the warm waters of the southern seas and enabled it to make its influence felt in the vast Eurasian 'heartland' where the writ

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of Moscow ran.<sup>1</sup> Russia has been interested in the area's rich natural gas and oil resources, and viewed Central Asia as a buffer zone against foreign incursions. Post 9/11, security in Central Asia has been a key factor in the broader calculus of Russia, China, and American interests.

Russia's policy approach towards Central Asia during the Tsarist regime, Soviet Russia and the Russian Federation reflects the strategic relevance of the region which is also emphasised in Mackinder's "Heartland Theory" as the "pivot area". The theory mainly constituted Central Asia and the Caspian Sea. Mackinder, in 1919, summarised the relevance of the "Heartland Theory" as:

- Who rules East Europe, commands the heartland.
- Who rules the heartland, commands the world-island.
- Who rules the world-island, rules the world.<sup>2</sup>

**Fig 1**



*Source:* Darbishire & Stanford. Ltd The Oxford Geo Institute

- Pivot Area: wholly continental.
- Outer Crescent: wholly oceanic.

1. Jyotsna Bakshi, "Russian Policy Towards Central Asia-I", *Strategic Analysis*, vol. XXII, no.10, January 1999, pp. 1582, 1584.
2. H.J. Makinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History", *The Geographical Journal*, vol.23, no.4, April 1924, pp. 421-435.

- Inner Crescent: partly continental and partly oceanic.

This paper, therefore, aims to study the implications of the policies pursued by Russia in the post-Cold War era to achieve its vital national interests in Central Asia. It also focusses on the political discourse and the parameters in understanding how military instruments, structures, economic strength and political judgment are employed to achieve the goals set by the grand strategy of Russia towards Central Asia.

**The Central Asian region also led to the arrival of the ‘great game’ which was the strategic rivalry between the two colonial powers—the British Empire and the Russian Empire—during the industrial revolution.**

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Russia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century explored regions in search of warm-water ports. The “Eastward Policy” of expansion of Peter the Great, the demand for natural resources and cheap raw materials during the industrial revolution and the construction of the railroad that connected Russia motivated Moscow to occupy the region. Russia intended to control the Turkish Straits, India, Caucasus, Central Asia and Iran and establish its hegemony over the Black Sea, Mediterranean Persian Gulf and, lastly, the Indian Ocean<sup>3</sup>. Russia aimed to play a vital role in world politics and to control these main world trade routes. The Tsarist government used its colonies for strategic and economic benefit, much as the other European powers did. The Russian Empire occupied and annexed Central Asia to overcome the drawbacks of its geographical proximity. The government turned Central Asia into a captive market for Russian industrial products by setting high tariffs for foreign goods.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the Turkestan region fulfilled such Russian demands with its huge amounts of oil and gas reserves and since then, the influence of Russia had been very great over the region until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

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3. “Geopolitical Importance of Central Asia: The Soviet Period and Post Cold War”, <http://www.emu.edu.tr/~eefegil/geopolitical%20importance.htm>, accessed on September 24, 2013.

4. Daniel Pipes, “The Third World: Premises of U.S Foreign Policy”, in W. Scott Thompson, ed, *Institute for Contemporary Studies* (San Francisco, 1978), pp. 155-174.

The Central Asian region also led to the arrival of the 'great game' which was the strategic rivalry between the two colonial powers—the British Empire and the Russian Empire—during the industrial revolution. Russia's fear of the penetration of British colonial power into Central Asia from the Indian subcontinent and the British desire to do so led both colonial empires to create Afghanistan as a buffer state that stopped the incursion of colonial powers into the region. Therefore, the great game between the Russian and British Empires comprised an imperial rivalry to control the large reserves of oil and gas of Central Asia and was not just merely for control of territory.<sup>5</sup>

### SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA

Under the banner of Communist International, the 1917 October Revolution resulted in the overthrow of the Tsarist rule and the Bolsheviks constituted the new state i.e. the Soviet Union. Based on the "nationalities policy" introduced by Stalin, the Turkestan region or Central Asia was declared as National Republics and, thus, became territorial political entities of the USSR.

The republics that were created were as follows:

- Uzbekistan SSR and Turkmenistan SSR in 1924.
- Tajikistan SSR in 1929.
- Kyrgyzstan SSR and Kazakhstan SSR in 1936.<sup>6</sup>

These republics were given some powers, territorial rights, and privileges that included full-fledged citizenship to their people. Unlike the European colonies, the republics of Central Asia enjoyed better status and benefits from the Soviet rule.

### *The Political Structure During the Soviet Rule*

As Central Asia was controlled by centralised Soviet rule, it came under one common authority with a common entity. The people of Central Asia

5. Margaret Scott and Westenley Alcenat, "Revisiting the Pivot: The Influence of Heartland Theory in Great Power Politics", May 2008, [http://www.creighton.edu/fileadmin/user/CCAS/departments/PoliticalScience/MVJ/docs/The\\_Pivot\\_Alcenat\\_and\\_Scott.pdf](http://www.creighton.edu/fileadmin/user/CCAS/departments/PoliticalScience/MVJ/docs/The_Pivot_Alcenat_and_Scott.pdf), accessed on October 10, 2013

6. Shirin Akiner, "Islam, the State and Ethnicity in Central Asia in Historical Perspective", *Religion, State and Society*, vol.24, nos. 2/3, 1996, pp. 93-96.

enjoyed legal equality and no distinction was made during recruitment in the army. However, Moscow enjoyed privileges in terms of the foreign policy decisions of the region, and the powers of the legislature, judiciary, and control over the military vested in the hands of the Soviet rulers. Moreover, the elites of the regions never challenged Moscow's authority and the populations loyally followed the Soviet leadership's directives.<sup>7</sup>

### *Economic Structure*

One positive justification for the Central Asian masses to support the Soviet Union rule was that they derived large and genuine benefits from the Soviet system. They enjoyed a better standard of living than the majority of Muslims elsewhere in their neighbouring regions. They enjoyed superior medical care, education, and social benefits as compared to the citizens of Egypt, Iraq, or Afghanistan. Similarly, the Soviet system was comparatively meritocratic, and ambitious Central Asians could "dream big". Even some talented women were able to move upward. Specialised research institutes were established in Central Asia, and republican Academies of Sciences were established later. The brightest students were able to pursue their studies in Moscow and other major research centres in the Soviet Union, and through this channel, to become members of the international academic community.<sup>8</sup>

**Table 1: Literacy Rates of Central Asia During Soviet Rule in Percentage**

NATIONALITY	1897	1926	1959
Kazakhs	1.0	25.0	97.0
Kyrgyz	0.6	4.5	95.0
Tajiks	3.9	2.3	96.0
Turkmen	0.7	7.8	95.4
Uzbeks	1.9	3.6	98.0

*Source:* <http://www.oxuscom.com/lang-policy.htm#table%202>

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7. Martha Brill Olcott, "Unlocking the Assets: Energy and the Future of Central Asia and the Caucasus Central Asia: Confronting Independence," Centre for International Political Economy and the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy of Rice University, Texas, April 1998, pp. 4-10

8. Ibid., pp. 5-6.

### *Cultural Dimensions*

As Central Asia was a Muslim populated region, the Soviet Union regarded Islam with hostility and suspicion. During Stalin's regime, Muslims were subject to countless secularisation campaigns and the Islamic identity was replaced with the ethnic identity. The Soviets also suppressed any public manifestation of Islam and, thus, did not desire to create an "Islamic Turkistan".<sup>9</sup>

Despite the region being under the Soviet rule for 70 years, the Central Asians insistence on preserving the union was a well-founded result of several realisations.

- The level of national self-awareness throughout the region was quite low. Not only did the Central Asian states have no history of previous statehood, their boundaries and even the people for whom they were named were, to a great extent, political creations of the Soviet period.
- The chequered demographic and religious make-up of the new entities forebode the difficulties associated with the integration of all communities into a single nation.
- The region constituted a common geopolitical, cultural, and religious space and the leaders recognised the great challenges that interdependence and dependence on the former metropolis would pose to the new sovereign states.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, the Soviet policy, during the Cold War period originated with core Soviet interests that reflected geography as much as ideology and power politics. Eastern Europe was considered as a base and political laboratory, a military and ideological buffer zone by the Soviets against the West, and it protected socialist power and Soviet influence over the rest of Europe.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, through ideology and the establishment of national republics, Soviet Russia justified its permanent rule over non-Russians. However, the Central Asian Republics (CARs) benefited from the Soviet political

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9. Akiner, n.6, pp. 93-96.

10. Olcott, n.7, pp. 4-10.

11. Bulent Gokay, *Soviet Eastern Policy and Turkey 1920-1991: Soviet Foreign Policy, Turkey and Communism* (London: Routledge Publishers, 2006), p.78.

structures, dramatic economic policies and the great education system and, hence, fared better during the Soviet rule.

#### **POST-SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA:**

##### **DISINTEGRATION AND INDEPENDENCE**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Newly Independent States (NIS) emerged as a strategic relevant region in the new world order due to their rich oil and gas resources, ethnic conflicts, the events of 9/11, the declaration of the war on terror and the penetration of the US led North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) alliance into the region. The region not only became a contested zone for Russia but also for the European Union (EU), America, and China, with the coming of the 'new great game'. In addition, the CARs comprise the only region in the world where the impact of four nuclear powers comes into play: Russia, China, India and Pakistan.<sup>12</sup>

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With independence, the CARs began to define their political orientation through national consolidation, political alliances and independent foreign policies that were more exploratory in nature. Although the republics maintained cordial relations with the Russian Federation, they developed close ties with other regional and extra-regional actors and signed various multilateral and bilateral agreements.

However, the CARs, after their breakaway from Moscow's centralised power, lacked the experience that comes from independent statehood. Until 1991, Central Asia was simply considered an appendage of the Soviet Union's domestic preoccupation and faced two alternative developmental paths:

- Either integrating into a common space with Russia; or
- Distancing themselves from the former hegemonic country.<sup>13</sup>

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12. Ibid., p. 81.

13. Leonard A Stone, "Research and Eurasia: Geopolitical Contours", *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. VI, no. 1, March-May 2001, p. 4

As for Russia, it had been the dominant player in Central Asia for nearly a century and a half, and although its presence is waning, it is far from ready to disappear from the scene completely. The first five years of the CARs' independence can be viewed as Russia's attempt to retain the benefits of the economic and military control that it enjoyed during the Soviet period without having to pay the social and political costs which had, in large part, driven the Soviet Union to collapse.<sup>14</sup>

### *Energy Dimension*

For the fossil-fuel-rich Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, Russia holds two important levers--its position on the status of the Caspian Sea and the Central Asians' absolute dependence on the Russian pipeline network. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have offered Russia's major oil and gas firms Lukoil, Rosneft and Gazprom equity ownership stakes in some key deposits and refineries in order to mollify the objections of the Russian government to the sectoral division of the Caspian Sea. During the Soviet period, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan were provided with Siberian oil and gas for their internal consumption, but each country has only a few pipelines all of which connect the two newly independent states with Russia. In Kazakhstan, the main outward routes are the Atyrau-Samara pipeline, the Transneft pipeline, and an almost complete Tengiz-Novorossiisk pipeline, all of which take Kazakh oil to Russia. Existing Turkmen gas pipelines also take the country's resources to Russia via Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.<sup>15</sup>

Currently, Kazakhstan accounts for approximately 40 percent of Lukoil's proven reserves; projects in Kazakhstan provide over 90 percent of oil and over 40 percent of natural gas produced by Lukoil outside Russian territory. Rosneft, operating in Kazakhstan under the "RN-Exploration" brand, has been less successful in Kazakhstan so far. And it has to be said that Russia's share in Central Asian oil sales overall remains modest. Despite a rapid rise since 2003, trade in the hydrocarbon sector is still below the Soviet-era levels.<sup>16</sup>

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14. Olcott, n.7, pp. 21-23.

15. Ibid., pp. 25-27.

16. Craig Oliphant, "Assessing Russia's Role in Central Asia", Foreign Policy Centre, Saferworld, (London, October 2013), p. 8.



As one of the world's single most important energy producers, Russia plays a central role in international energy markets. Russia's investment and regulatory decisions have a profound impact on global energy supplies, particularly in the light of its ageing energy infrastructure and limited investment in future production opportunities.<sup>17</sup> Hence, Central Asian oil and gas resources are very important for Moscow and are invaluable for the revival of the Russian economy. Oil, natural gas and the gold industry are the most attractive areas for foreign investment and also serve as a potentially valuable transit corridor to Russian energy markets.

Russia's economic engagement with Central Asia is more multifaceted, encompassing sectors such as mining, construction, the military-industrial complex, telecommunications, transport, and agriculture. Overall trade turnover in 2011 stood at \$27.3 billion. Russia's main exports to the Central Asian countries are primarily manufactured goods, namely, foodstuffs, machinery, textiles, and transportation equipment. The main products exported from Central Asia to Russia are natural and agricultural raw materials, as well as chemicals.<sup>18</sup>

The CARs have begun to pursue foreign policies based on pragmatic concerns that include economic necessities, demand for stability, reducing nuclear weapons, and so on. Therefore, most of these states have wanted to create a "new international system" based on the concepts of global cooperation, territorial integrity, non-interference in their domestic affairs, mutual respect and peaceful coexistence.<sup>19</sup>

In order to pursue its interests in the economic sphere, Moscow has initiated a number of economic institutions –the Customs Union (CU); Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC); Eurasian Development Bank (EDB); Anti-Crisis Fund; and CIS Free Trade Zone (FTZ) Agreement, among others. For its part, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is mooted to be launched in 2015.<sup>20</sup>

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17. Graham Allison, et al, "Russia and U.S. National Interests: Why Should Americans Care?", Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs and Centre for the National Interest, (Washington, 2011), pp. 7-10.

18. Oliphant, n.16, p.10.

19. "Geopolitical Importance of Central Asia: The Soviet Period and Post Cold War", <http://www.emu.edu.tr/~eefegil/geopolitical%20importance.htm>, accessed on October 19, 2013.

20. Oliphant, n.16, pp.6-9.

As Russia continues to depend heavily on supplies of raw materials from the Central Asian states, disengagement from the region is not economically desirable either. Losing its monopoly of regional transport and communications, oil and gas pipelines will lead to the loss of direct access to the region's rich natural resources and strategic minerals. Consequently, several areas have remained a matter of profound interest and vital concern for Russia in the post Cold War era. Russia has been actively pursuing a policy to reestablish the economic, political, and military control over Central Asia that it lost with the collapse of the USSR.<sup>21</sup>

## **CENTRAL ASIA: RUSSIA'S SECURITY CONCERNS**

### *Ethnic Crisis*

The aftermath tremors of the Soviet disintegration left many of the republics ill-prepared for independence. Central Asia became a fragile zone which came in the form of economic difficulties, rise in Islamic fundamentalism, border disputes among countries, ethnic clashes, and inter-state conflicts that posed a great threat to regional instability. These NIS also faced an unprecedented task of having to adapt to the new economic systems and political institutions, especially with the transfer of power from Soviet rule.

Though the post-Soviet states agreed to honour the existing borders, with the overlapping populations, there is considerable potential for future claims and cross-border ethnic issues and for the spread of conflicts from one country to another. Due to the Soviet policies, each of the republics had significant minority populations. Ethnic Russians comprised approximately 35 percent of Kazakhstan's population, and 20 percent of Kyrgyzstan's. There are over 500,000 Uzbeks living in Kyrgyzstan and over one million in Tajikistan. In return, approximately one million Tajiks and just under a million Kazakhs live in Uzbekistan. Outside the borders of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), there are over one million Uzbeks in Afghanistan, some 500,000 Turkmen each in Afghanistan, Iran,

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21. Ibid., p. 11.

Iraq, and Turkey, and about 2 million Tajiks in Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the Uzbek population in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan called for a union with Uzbekistan, motivated not only “by ethnic ties, but also by Uzbekistan’s growing economic and strategic importance”. Coupled with Uzbekistan’s self-image as the centre of “Greater Turkestan”, these calls have caused considerable unease among neighbouring countries. In a similar fashion, extreme Russian nationalists in Kazakhstan argued that the northern territories should be simply ceded to Russia. Although, most of the Russians in Kazakhstan seem to favour preservation of the *status quo*, this could change in the longer term if it becomes economically more convenient to join Russia or if ethnic Kazakh nationalism becomes a burden for them.<sup>23</sup>

There are many disputes among the Central Asian Republics, according to studies conducted by the “Atlantic Council of the United States”; some of them are mentioned below<sup>24</sup>:

**Table 2**

Kazakhstan	Vostochnyy Kazakhstan	Ethnic Russian separatists call for independence in southern border	Occasional Incidents
	Eastern Border	Uighur separatist support for compatriots in Xinjiang	Active
	Southern Border	Skirmishes and tensions in Uzbekistan	Active
Kyrgyzstan	Batken and Lailek	Periodic guerrilla activity	
	SW border/ Fergana	Tensions skirmishes with Uzbekistan	Active (at intervals)
Tajikistan	Civil War	Government Vs United Tajik Opposition	Ceasefire since 1997

22. Mustafa Aydın, “New Geopolitics of Central Asia and the Caucasus: Causes of Instability and Predicament”, Centre for Strategic Research (Ankara, 2000), pp. 9-11.

23. Ibid., pp.7-9.

24. Bahram Amirahmadian, “Geo-political, Geo-strategic and Eco-strategic Importance of Central Asia”, *International Politics*, vol. 1, no.1, Winter 2008, p. 6.

	Khujand	Tensions skirmishes with Uzbekistan	Active
	Ghorno-Badakshan	Seperatist activity for Islmai'lis	Potential/ Latent
Turkmenistan	Chirag (Caspian)	Demarcation dispute with Azerbaijan	Active
Uzbekistan	Eastern, Northern and Southern borders	Incidents with neighbours/ skirmishes with guerrillas	Active
	Kara Kalpakstan	Separatist activities	Potential/ Latent

*Source:* Strategic Assessment of Central Eurasia, January 2001, p.18.

The relative lack of tension could be attributed to the fact that all of the current heads of state in the region, again excluding Tajikistan, have provided short-term stability which is not an adequate basis to ensure long-term stability. In fact, some of Central Asia's authoritarian regimes, seen as helpful for regional stability, may actually be concealing fundamental problems, allowing the seeds of future conflicts to grow.<sup>25</sup>

These ethno-national and religious identities of Central Asia as a variable pose a greater threat to Russia's backyard after Islam became the main source of cultural identity in the post Soviet period. Hence, Russia has redefined its security policies, marking a departure from the general notion of Soviet-style Communism to a policy that emphasises on creating a security zone in the countries which the Soviet Union perceives as its zone of "privileged interests".

### *Rise of Islam*

Although Central Asia did not suffer repression during the Soviet rule, unlike other colonies under European empires, the long periods of Russian imperial rule indoctrinated the Soviet-era atheistic system since it viewed Islam with suspicion and hostility. The Soviets realised that as a Muslim dominated region, Islam comprised an influential element in the conduct of

25. Sergey Radchenko, "The Soviet Union and Asia, 1940s-1960s", Slavic Research Centre, (Sapporo, Japan), no.9, July 2012, pp. 91-95.

not only the individual's but also the collective identity of the population of the republics. But, after the Soviet incursion in Afghanistan, the region of Central Asia which was completely cut off from the outside Muslim world was exposed to the Islamic way of life. Since then, Islam became a politicised mechanism for the rise of extremism in the region.

Moreover, the programme of nation building throughout the region since independence has been represented by largely secular elites which soon realised that Islam remained an important part of the region's social and cultural life, and, if exploited as a political tool, offered various advantages to them. Thus, Soviet educated leaders considered "an appeal to Islamic symbols and traditions" useful in their effort to reinforce their legitimacy, as "Islam and the values it espoused were attractive" to the people, who had "little else to define themselves by".<sup>26</sup>

Gorbachev's policies of *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* relaxed the years of Soviet suppression of religious identity in Central Asia during the Soviet rule. Furthermore, the penetration of the Taliban from Afghanistan into the region further aggravated religious fanaticism in Central Asia. Under such circumstances, Russia perceives its presence in the region as an act of 'insulating its own backyard' after its two key military interventions against militant Islamists during the Chechnya conflict.

Political Islam (as opposed to a purely cultural interest in the religion) has yet to make a significant mark in the region. Even in the context of the Tajik conflict, "while religious ideology was part of the conflict", it was "not the source of the civil war". Instead, it was a political power struggle for supremacy between various competing provinces and groups, with the flair of Islam on the sidelines. "Thus, the role of Islam was [rather] symbolic,

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26. Aydın, n.22, pp. 13-14.

providing an ideological [justification] for anti-government forces".<sup>27</sup>

When Uzbekistan and Russia intervened militarily in support of the Tajik government in 1993, they were motivated by the fear that if the "Islamist" opposition in Tajikistan succeeded in overthrowing the government, the repercussions of Islamic fundamentalism might be felt throughout Central Asia and even in Russia. However, it is ironic that, though at the time the Islamic opposition lacked the capability to establish an Islamic state in Tajikistan, outside intervention and their forced exile in Afghanistan only served to further 'Islamicise' them. Since then, Islamic political parties have returned to Tajikistan as part of the peace accord, signed in June 1997, under Russian sponsorship. It remains to be seen whether they will be able to coexist with the present political and social system.<sup>28</sup>

With Islamic extremism taking hold of neighbouring Afghanistan and movements like Wahhabism emerging in both Central Asia and the North Caucasus, Islam might become a destabilising force throughout the region. Whether the threat of Islamic fundamentalism is real or perceived, Islam as a cultural phenomenon remains a potent force. Therefore, it is conceivable that in the future, it may yet come to play an important social and political role. Above all, if the development of secular democratic institutions and channels of popular expression are blocked and the current governments fail to improve their people's living conditions, "Islam may emerge as the only vehicle for the expression of grievance and dissent."<sup>29</sup>

### *Economic Inequality, Poverty and Corruption*

Uneven development patterns are a significant potential source of instability in Central Asia. Differences in the natural resource bases have provoked economically driven migration, polarised ethnic groups and caused increased tensions. This, combined with widespread unemployment, has created the potential for conflict. Furthermore, regional competition for

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27. Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, "Central Asia and Afghanistan: Insulation on the Silk Road, Between Eurasia and the Heart of Asia", Peace Research Institute Oslo (Greenland, 2012), p. 9.

28. Ibid., pp. 9-11.

29. Sara E. Thannhauser, "Russia Resurgent? Challenges and Consequences of Shifting Geopolitical Dynamics in Eurasia", Institute for the Study of Diplomacy (Washington, Spring 2009), pp. 7-9.

control over the Caspian Sea and the oil resources that lie beneath its seabed offer special challenges.<sup>30</sup>

The redistribution of wealth within societies is another potential source of conflict if mismanaged, and which, in the extreme poverty found in parts of Central Asia, can destabilise the region. The rapid economic and social changes since the collapse of the Soviet Union left many people with a lower standard of living than they previously enjoyed, especially without the social safety net that the Soviet regime provided. Thus, the rapid changes and economic pressures have led to a marked increase in personal corruption and, consequently, a negative impact on regional stability.

Another problem connected with the regional economic downturn is drug trafficking and the related criminal activities. Although it has not yet played a very substantial role in regional politics, the rate at which drug trafficking is spreading in Central Asia, is staggering and brings with it corruption, arms dealing and the possibilities of conflict.

Astronomical profit margins combined with the sharp economic downturn and collapse of the social safety net have lured many people into the opium trade.<sup>31</sup> The people generally involved are those whom the social security system protects the least and they turn to the narcotics trade as a matter of survival. The drug trade has many negative effects on the region, such as the influx of small arms, which often accompanies drug smuggling.

## INTERNATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF INSTABILITY

### *Afghanistan*

Central Asia is linked to Afghanistan geographically and shares important demographic ties with the region. Afghanistan is an ethnically diverse country, with more than a dozen ethno-linguistic groups represented

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30. Kathleen Collin, "The Political Role of Clans in Central Asia," *Comparative Politics*, vol. 35, no. 2, January, 2003, pp. 171-190, accessed on February 13, 2013.

31. Jim Nichol, "Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for US Interests", *Congressional Research Service*, January 2013.

**While Soviet Russia succeeded to a large extent in suppressing the Islamic identity, much to its dismay, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989 resulted in direct interaction between Soviet Army personnel and their ethnic cohorts in Afghanistan.**

substantially in the country's population.<sup>32</sup>

As mentioned earlier, during the great game, Afghanistan was viewed as a buffer zone in order to prevent expansion of either the Russian or British Empire during their colonial rule. In addition, the Soviet policies towards Central Asia also ensured that the region remained completely isolated from any contact with the rest of the Muslim world as the Soviets feared that the spread of Islam in the region would result in instability and radicalise the Muslim populated region. While Soviet Russia succeeded to a large extent in suppressing the Islamic identity, much to its dismay, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989 resulted in direct interaction between Soviet Army personnel and their ethnic cohorts in Afghanistan during the Soviet military operation there as a large part of the Soviet military consisted of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmen.

Moreover, Afghanistan consists of three major ethnic groups: Pashtuns, Tajiks, and Uzbeks. Since Tajiks and Uzbeks were also present in the Soviet Union Army, there was significant unrest in the Asian Soviet Republics about the war against people of the same ethnicity. Furthermore, the war was perceived by these republics as a Russian war being fought by Central Asians against other Central Asians, and the invasion of Afghanistan was viewed by the republics as a war for an alien cause.<sup>33</sup>

However, the withdrawal of the Soviet Army and the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan coincided with a number of significant developments in Central Asia. Central Asia faced immense economic and political challenges as Russia withdrew subsidies, and the Soviet military-industrial complex with which the Central Asians were so integrated also collapsed. For

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32. George Voskopoulos "Central Asia and Afghanistan: A Tumultuous History", *Startfor Global Intelligence*, September 2013.

33. Rafael Reuveny and Aseem Prakash, "The Afghanistan War and the Breakdown of the Soviet Union", *Review of International Studies*, vol 24, no.04, November 1999, p. 694.



instance, Tajikistan descended into civil war almost immediately, when groups from the Kulyabi and Khujand regions known as the Popular Front were pitted against an array of opposition elements including Islamists, democrats and the Pamiri clan from the east, collectively known as the United Tajik Opposition.<sup>34</sup> Outside groups got involved in the civil war, supporting the different sides along political and ideological lines. Russia and Uzbekistan supported the secular and neo-Communist Popular Front, while many Tajiks in Afghanistan supported the United Tajik Opposition, particularly the Islamist elements of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan.<sup>35</sup> One of the groups that joined in the fighting alongside the United Tajik Opposition and the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan was known as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). From 1999 to 2001, the Uzbek militant movement conducted a series of attacks in Uzbekistan and in Uzbek enclaves in southern Kyrgyzstan in the Fergana Valley. The Taliban gave refuge to the IMU in exchange for the Uzbek group's participation in Taliban offensives against the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras in northern Afghanistan.<sup>36</sup>

The rise of the Taliban ended with the United States' invasion of Afghanistan following the September 11 attacks by Al Qaeda in 2001 and with the subsequent declaration of the 'war on terror'. Russia jumped onto the bandwagon during the invasion that was facilitated by the support of the Northern Alliance and, hence, was able to displace the Taliban from Afghanistan.

### ***Pakistan***

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Pakistan considered Central Asia as a significant region not only due to its close cultural linkages but also for its rich energy reserves in the region. During the Soviet rule, Central Asia had no direct contact with Pakistan. Moreover, during the Soviet invasion of

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34. "Central Asia and Afghanistan: A Tumultuous History," *Startfor Global Intelligence*, September 2013.

35. n. 27.

36. Ahmad Rashid, "The Taliban: Exporting Extremism", *Foreign Affairs*, November-December 1999, p. 11

**The rise of the Taliban in the 1990s was seen as an opportunity for the Pakistani foreign policy consideration of a land transit route to Central Asia. Pakistan also officially recognised the Taliban government in Kabul.**

Afghanistan, Pakistan served as the logistical support for the Afghan Mujahideen in the region. The rise of the Taliban in the 1990s was seen as an opportunity for the Pakistani foreign policy consideration of a land transit route to Central Asia. Pakistan also officially recognised the Taliban government in Kabul.

Unlike the other main players in the region, including Russia, China, India, Iran, Turkey and the US, Pakistan's political conditions and fragile economy have prevented it from engaging with Central Asia. The unrest in Afghanistan has also affected Pakistan's ties with the CARs. In the context of Pakistan's ties with the CARs, Afghanistan's security situation is of immense significance as it offers the most direct access for the Central Asian region to the ports and markets in South Asia and the Persian Gulf. Afghanistan can also be the conduit for Central Asian oil and gas to South Asia and Iran.<sup>37</sup>

As for Russia's approach towards Pakistan, Islamabad never had good relations with Russia, especially due to Pakistan's support for the Mujahideen during the Soviet-Afghan War. Post 9/11, Moscow's ties with Islamabad, however, improved after Pakistan dramatically altered its policy with Afghanistan, downgrading its ties with the country and closing its border. These factors have led to warming of the latter's relations with the CARs while Russia considers Central Asia its strategic backyard and is very sensitive to any factor that might impact the region.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, Russians comprise a major ethnic group in Central Asia. Hence, Russia's priorities towards the region are also justified in protecting its ethnic groups. Therefore, Pakistan must be vigilant in its stance on Afghanistan.

The rise of Islamic extremism from Afghanistan and Pakistan will have a major impact on Russia's Muslim population (second largest population in Russia), especially the separatist movements among certain

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37. "Russia and Afghanistan", Institute for the Study of War, 2013, <http://www.understandingwar.org/russia-and-afghanistan>

38. Ibid.

ethnic groups, and particularly the Islamic and separatist movements in Chechnya.<sup>39</sup> The Kremlin views these forces as a severe threat to the state, and, thus, willingly supported the US-led overthrow of the Taliban which was an irritant in Russia's security concerns. Outside its borders, Russia is concerned about the growth of Islamism and terrorism in its traditional sphere of influence or "near abroad"—the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Many militants from these areas have significant ties to the Taliban, Al Qaeda, or other groups in Afghanistan, and, therefore, Russia does not want to see a Taliban comeback in Kabul or a failed state emerge in Afghanistan. While the Kremlin may disapprove of NATO's presence along its southern frontier, it does not want to see Afghanistan become a safe haven for separatist, terrorist, or Islamist forces.<sup>40</sup>

Russia's policy towards this region is intended to prevent any sort of ethnic or inter-state conflict that could explode in the region since the Central Asian region is vulnerable to border disputes and ethnic conflicts.

## INTERACTION WITH GLOBAL POWERS

### *United States*

The declaration of the "war on terror" changed world politics and the global balance of forces, making diplomacy much more dynamic, complex and multi-dimensional. A plethora of attempts was made in redefining security objectives and perceptions by the West. The US has been in an advantageous position in the international community after the collapse of the Soviet Union as it helped the US establish itself as a leading power bloc to fill the vacuum in the Eurasian region. Based on the principles of the Truman Doctrine, the US began to provide both military and financial assistance to many of the newly independent states.

In order to preserve its hegemony as a superpower after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, the US implemented its expansionist policies in Eurasia by a coordinated drive to prevent the emergence of a consolidated bloc led

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39. Collin, n.30, pp. 171-190.

40. n.37.

by the Russian Federation. Hence, the US policy incorporated in the region falls within two broad perceptions of analysis:

1. US policy is geopolitical and is motivated by a geostrategic effort to contain terrorism and the rise of a regional hegemon like Russia or China.
2. US policy is guided by geoeconomics in an effort to access the region's natural resources and decrease the political clout of Russia.
3. US policy towards the region is also aimed at
  - increasing the supply of energy to consumers;
  - preventing any one state from monopolising the energy supply;
  - enhancing the democratic process, which would ultimately ease these processes.<sup>41</sup>

In addition, during the initial years after their independence, the CARs' policy approach was mainly exploratory, tentative and largely reactive to external pressures. Although they maintained cordial relations with Russia, they also ensured strengthening of their sovereignty and independence by developing closer ties with other global and regional powers. Hence, within a relatively short period, the priorities and approaches to their foreign policies have increased. Participation in the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the US-dominated NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP), and the Sino-Russia dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a clear reflection of their ambitions.<sup>42</sup>

In the post 9/11 scenario, US policy toward the Central Asian states has aimed at facilitating their cooperation with the stabilisation efforts in Afghanistan of the US and NATO, and their efforts to combat terrorism. States such as Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have hosted their troops and also provided access to their air bases.

However, Uzbekistan rescinded US basing rights to support operations in Afghanistan in 2005 after the United States criticised the reported killing

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41. Scott and Alcenat, n.5, pp.8-9.

42. Alyson J. K. Bailes, et al; "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization", Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Sweden, 2007), p.17.

of civilians in the town of Andijon. In early 2009, Kyrgyzstan ordered a US base in that country to close, allegedly because of Russian inducements and US reluctance to meet Kyrgyz requests for greatly increased lease payments. An agreement on continued US use of the Manas Transit Centre was reached in June 2009. The Kyrgyz leadership, however, declared that it will not extend the basing agreement when it comes up for renewal in 2014. In recent years, most of the regional states have also participated in the Northern Distribution Network for the transport of US and NATO supplies into and out of Afghanistan. Other US objectives have included promoting free markets, democratisation, human rights, energy development, and the forging of East-West and Central Asia-South Asia trade links. Such policies aim to help the states become what various US Administrations have considered to be responsible members of the international community.<sup>43</sup>

The event of 9/11 also led to the partnership between Russia and NATO based on common interests. In addition, for NATO and Russia, rebalancing their power politics in the region came mostly in the form of military engagement. The New Great Game, the growing competition for energy resources increased the importance of the geopolitics and strategic relevance of the Central Asian Republics for both Russia and the US.

### *China*

China shares borders with many of the CARs and since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the region has been an important element in the Chinese security perspective. The main driver for China's emphasis on security along its western borders is its concern over instability in Xinjiang. With Central Asia much closer to the ethnic-Turkic Uyghurs than the ethnic Han Chinese, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is seen by Beijing as vulnerable to separatism. This view is largely warranted by history, as the nearly six-year period of an independent, Uyghur-ruled "East Turkestan" was only incorporated into the People's Republic of China in 1950. There is also an active, although still marginal separatist Uyghur movement advocating an

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43. Jim Nichol, "Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for US Interests", *United States Congressional Research Service*, November 2008, p. 11.

**There has been periodic ethnic unrest in Xinjiang, which the Chinese have dealt with by using force. The Chinese are extremely agitated about the prospects of further instability spreading from, or being supported by, the newly independent states of Central Asia.**

independent “Turkestan”, the west of which falls within the territories of contemporary Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. This group has been, according to China, linked to a series of anti-Chinese activities, ranging from local riots to a 1997 bombing in Beijing, and has some reported links to both Central Asian Islamist movements and Al Qaeda.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, there are about two million Kazakhs living in the Xinjiang region of China, which is populated overwhelmingly by approximately 8 million Uyghurs, whose 250,000 kin are divided among Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.<sup>45</sup> There has been

periodic ethnic unrest in Xinjiang, which the Chinese have dealt with by using force. The Chinese are extremely agitated about the prospects of further instability spreading from, or being supported by, the newly independent states of Central Asia.

As for the economic implications of China's policy in Central Asia, the rich deposits of natural resources comprise the major element in fostering greater economic growth of China and a main source for the growing energy demand in China. The economic and political growth in China is apparent in each of the four Central Asian SCO member states. Hence, the construction of a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to China was completed in December 2009. Chinese investors are also present in strategically important sectors—energy, transport and telecommunications—of Uzbekistan's economy. Uzbek President Islam Karimov, at an SCO Summit in Beijing, received a promise of Chinese investments and loans for a sum of \$5 billion and also signed a strategic agreement with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Kazakhstan and China concluded a similar agreement in 2011. The two

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44. Mark Burles, *Chinese Policy Toward Russia and the Central Asian Republics* (Washington: RAND, 1999), pp.9-11.

45. Radchenko, n.25, p. 9.

countries are linked by strong economic ties, especially in the energy sector. The Atyrau–Alashankou pipeline, owned by the Kazakh Company, KazMunaiGaz, and the China National Petroleum Corporation, is a source of oil for the Dushanzi refinery in the Chinese province of Xinjiang. The share of Chinese capital in a number of Kazakh fuel companies' ranges from 50 percent to 100 percent. For this reason, the 2011 protests by oil sector workers in Kazakh Zhanaozen have not been treated with indifference by the government in Beijing. In recent years, China has been taking care of its image in Kazakhstan, implementing social and development programmes in areas where Chinese companies operate. Chinese investments are a major source of capital in Kyrgyzstan. Enterprises in China are expanding road connections between the two countries. For the PRC, the close proximity of Kyrgyzstan with Xinjiang is essential. In order to stabilise Xinjiang, Beijing wants to develop the economy of the province, link it with the rest of the country, and maintain security in neighbouring post-Soviet Central Asia and Afghanistan.<sup>46</sup>

**The five landlocked republics are India's extended neighbours which are of a great significance due to their geostrategic location, historical linkages and also rich natural resources. There is ongoing cooperation in the defence and security sector, with India providing training to Tajik forces to cope with threats.**

The SCO was created in 2001 by Russia, China and four Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. For Russia and the PRC, it was also intended to be a tool to limit US influence in the region. Today, however, the SCO remains more a political factor in Sino-Central Asian approximation, which is a consequence of the growing economic importance of the PRC in Central Asia. Although the SCO itself is not a very active international alliance and fully-fledged institution, it remains hampered by the dominance of national interests over any sense of multilateral cooperation and sacrifice by its members. Despite the

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46. Ibid., pp.11-13

rhetoric, the fundamental strategic goals of the organisation for countering terrorism, securing borders and bolstering regional stability are all shared by the United States. The SCO is seriously outpaced by the scale and scope of US engagement in the region.<sup>47</sup>

### *India*

The five landlocked republics are India's extended neighbours which are of a great significance due to their geostrategic location, historical linkages and also rich natural resources. There is ongoing cooperation in the defence and security sector, with India providing training to Tajik forces to cope with threats. Further, in collaboration with the Tajikistan Air Force, India has its first and only military air base outside its territory in Farkhor Air Base. In 2011, India gained access to the North Caspian Sea, a region rich in oil and gas resources. It is known for its uranium, and India signed a civil nuclear agreement with Kazakhstan in 2011 providing access to uranium from the Central Asian countries for Indian reactors. Uzbekistan, on the other hand, shares historical and cultural ties with India. It has allowed Indian participation in the development of its Karakal gas reserves and also in joint military participation. But there is also the aspect of interplay between internal and external factors. India's growing demand for energy supplies and Turkmenistan's quest for diversification of its energy exports has locked the two sides in a strategic embrace. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, which will begin from the Doveletabad gas field and end in Fazilka on the Punjab border, is touted as the backbone of the emerging relationship.<sup>48</sup>

Despite its status of an emerging global power, India has failed to play a major role in Central Asia although it initiated the "Connect Central Asia" policy. Furthermore, the Allied pull-out from Afghanistan this year and the emergence of political instability and penetration of terrorists' activities with the revival of the Taliban in the region would make India's security more vulnerable to terrorists' activities. India's geographical placement and

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47. Giragosian Richard; "The Strategic Central Asian Arena", *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2006.

48. Jyoti Prasad Das, "India's 'Connect Central Asia' Policy," *Foreign Policy Journal*, October 29, 2012<http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2012/10/29/indias-connect-central-asia-policy/>



its problematic relationships with China and Pakistan partly account for its reticence to play a major role in the region.

### **THE ROAD AHEAD**

Russia continues to view Central Asia as its periphery post disintegration of the Soviet Union and the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Despite its economic problems and political fragility, Russia's aspiration to play a major role in Central Asia has not diluted, which has, in turn, led to Russia being sensitive to the growing influence of external global actors in the region, especially the US. Hence, apart from its foreign policy to reclaim its influential role in Central Asia, the economic policy of Russia has banked on the rich energy resources of the region as the growing demand for energy markets has revived the fragile economic condition of the Russian Federation after its disintegration.

The expansion of the role of external actors in the region, especially the United States, has been a cause of concern for Moscow as the existence of the US-led NATO is the key element in defining and rebuilding Russia's geopolitical status as a global power in the international arena. The other defining factor for Russia to play a central role in Central Asia is the protection of ethnic Russians in the region who constitute a major chunk of the population. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan this year have been major concerns for Russia. Russia has been a soft target for terrorist attacks and, hence, would play a major role in curtailing the rise of terrorism in the region, and maintaining regional peace and stability.

While Russia sees the Central Asian region as its zone of influence, it is important to realise that the CARs have been independently pursuing their foreign policy relations with other external actors too although Russia has been the prime actor in the region. Its membership in the Partnership for Peace and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation apart from the Collective Security Treaty Organisation is evidence that the CARs have been cautious

in not allowing an individual external actor to monopolise the role in the region.