

# **The Greater Central Asia Concept and Implications for India**

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## **Greater Central Asia: Definition and Salience**

The broader geo-strategic construct of Central Asia can be best understood by its definitional perspective. Definition that best encapsulates the region which in many ways can be described as the heartland of Eurasia is 'Greater Central Asia' (GCA), a term that includes five Central Asian States, Afghanistan and Turkic Xinjiang Region of China. This can be further extended to include northern parts of Pakistan, Khorasan province of Iran, Russian areas of Tatarstan and even Northern India to provide it definite South Asian contours<sup>1</sup>.

Seen in above perspective, developments in Central Asia over the last two years, indicate a degree of strategic flux characterised by growing balance of power relationships and jockeying for influence amongst the three main actors i.e. the USA, Russia and China. Within these complex strategic equations and developments at regional and global level, five Central Asian Republics (CAR) are attempting to pursue their national interests through multi vector policies in a bid to balance their relationships with main actors to leverage political and economic advantages.

The current context of geo-strategic salience of Central Asia is underscored by two factors. First, Central Asia has become important because of the discovery of hydrocarbon reserves and second, it has become a major hub for gas and oil pipelines and multi-modal communication corridors emanating from it in all directions connecting China, Russia, Europe, the Caucasus region and the Trans-Caspian region. Central Asian regimes, being land locked, have always had a strategic ambition to open routes towards the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. It is in this context Afghanistan becomes a key strategic player. Central Asia and South Asia are intimately connected not only geographically but also strategically. The CAR of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have borders with Afghanistan, Iran lies to its west and Pakistan on the east and south, further enhancing the geo-strategic significance of Afghanistan.

## **The American Policy**

The Americans have traditionally considered distribution of power in the Eurasian heartland to be of decisive importance to its global primacy and it's historical legacy. Consequently, the USA continues to remain engaged as a major player in the region, though its strategic influence in Central Asia is somewhat on the wane - exemplified by loss of air bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan together with forced negotiations with Russia for an alternative supply route from the north via the Caspian Sea and Turkmenistan or through Uzbekistan. Of late, the USA seems to have learnt the virtues of being pragmatic and not being extremely assertive and aggressively nationalistic in its dealings with the CARs. The focus of its engagement revolves around promoting political dialogue, trade and economic relations and cooperation in many sectors including promoting good governance and democratic norms.

It is also attempting to leverage its relationship towards building energy and transport corridors, that avoid Russia, and go either South or West.

An important construct flowing out of the above US regional policies is 'GCA Concept' that aims at linking South and Central Asia through economic and energy corridors. Edifice of this strategy is stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Afghanistan is in fact the strategic fulcrum on which revolves the entire edifice of 'GCA' concept. By extension of plans for grand reconciliation between India and Pakistan, it provides economic rationale to 'go South policy' of CAR's. However developments in Af-Pak and standoff between the USA and Russia remains the major stumbling block.

Deterioration in the US-Russian relations, despite attempts by Obama administration to mend fences, is likely to have far reaching consequences for the Eurasian Heartland including CAR's. The most critical issue is the Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) and Iranian nuclear ambitions. In a major policy initiative on the day North Korea tested its missile (05 Apr 2009), President Obama unveiled his new foreign policy initiative - remarkably similar to exhortations by President Bush. He outlined his plans to continue with deployment of BMD in Central Europe till such time Iran brought its nuclear weapons programme within the ambit of NPT and abided by Security Council and other resolutions. This was in the shadow of basic agreement between the Russian and American Presidents on qualified disarmament, ensuring retention of robust nuclear weapon arsenal as a reassurance to NATO's Central European members, who fear that a diminished US military capacity would leave them vulnerable to Russian pressure.

## **The Russian Perspective**

To counter the US challenge, Russia can be said to be following a policy of incremental strategic assertion to keep the region within its ambit of influence and to capitalise on its natural resources through greater military cooperation using the instrumentality of Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) which encompass vast regions of the NATO in the west, to China in the east.

Security dynamics are being supported by enhancing trade and investments and inducing integration of linkages of Caspian and other hydrocarbon resources through new deals and pipeline linkages, providing access to the European suppliers. Turkmen gas remains central to Moscow's energy strategy in Central Asia. It enables Russia

to control gas supplies to energy-deficient Western Europe through Russian pipeline grids. However the continuing stand-off between the USA and Russia over Georgian issue is likely to get exacerbated by the mix of disarmament and BMD, perceived as an American attempt to degrade Russian position in regional security discourse. Given the prevailing economic, technological and geographical factors it will be difficult for the Russians to effectively deal with American BMD umbrella, thereby inducing it into a new arms race.

Notwithstanding the above, Russia is collaborating with the USA and NATO in providing an alternate supply route for International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the US forces. The logic and rationale of this was spelt out at the SCO conference on Afghanistan in Moscow in April, attended interestingly by both the USA and Iran – to prevent the northward march of Taliban and other pan – Islamic fundamentalist forces, as also to contain the rapid spread of narcotics and drugs through regional cooperation framework. The conference underscored the dangers being felt by the CARs towards which both the NATO and the SCO have common perceptions.

### **China's Footprints in Central Asia**

China too has improved its footprint in Central Asia largely through trade, energy deals, building infrastructure in western China and linking it up with Central Asia, and through the gradual enlargement of the scope and purpose of the SCO – both in the security arena and economic sphere. It has a long-term perspective and is willing to cooperate with Russia in order to make gains in Central Asia. However, many in China view the Eurasian Economic Community and CSTO as direct competitors of SCO. The main stimulus of Sino-Russian cooperation continues to be the shared objective of offsetting the US influence in CAR, which they may not be able to achieve in a stand-alone mode. While China needs Russia for arms imports, advanced technologies and its natural resources; for building its comprehensive national power, Russia needs China for balancing the West. In effect, the US and the West's approach to Russia shapes its level of cooperation with China. Another facet of Chinese policies flows out of its attempts to manage Chinese periphery which is seen by prescient Chinese leadership as its Achilles' heel. For example, Xinjiang has great political and strategic significance for China, an issue that got underscored during the run up to 2008 Olympics and thereafter. Stability in the region is thus an essential imperative for the Chinese, in particular control of trans-national fundamental impulses.

### **The European Union's Approach**

In so far as EU is concerned, while it remains engaged in projecting soft power, through programmes such as friendship for peace, its influence has been on the decline. Nonetheless, CARs continue to be attracted to them because engagement with NATO remains an important feature of their sovereignty, independence and balancing strategies. Central Asian nations also viewed NATO's greater engagement in the region as an opportunity to modernise their armed forces and upgrade their capacity to respond to the regional challenges of drug trafficking, religious extremism, terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The development of relations with NATO also constituted a counterweight, or at least a useful alternative, to their relations with Russia.

### **India and Central Asia**

India has been endeavouring to improve its profile in the region in order to exploit its energy reserves and to establish a mutually beneficial security and economic relationship. Central Asian nations, while exploiting the competition between different players for their own perceived national interests, have many conflicts among themselves and are still in the process of moving towards regional harmony. Political processes are yet to mature and the threat of terrorism remains real, especially because of the unstable situation in Afghanistan with the resurgence of the Taliban. It is in this backdrop that India with its civilizational and cultural linkages combined with its soft power approach is seen by most Central Asians as best suited to play the role of a balancer. In addition, flowing out from multi-vector policies of CARs is their desire to engage India in a mutually beneficial and comprehensive relationship. This inclination is strengthened by their experience of the negative effects of the intense power play that is taking place in Central Asia. India can play a positive role in the Central Asian environment where CARs are hard put to maintain balance between number of major players.

In the last one decade or so India's stature in international world order has been gaining salience because of its economic growth and its movement towards the world of real politics. India has also been pursuing policies of restoring its traditional linkages with the region and re-integrating itself with the immediate and extended neighbourhood. Further, integrating South and Central Asia would result in vast economic benefits to all the stakeholders involved leading to a positive outcome for stability and security in the region. But looking at the scenario in Afghanistan and Pakistan such integration is unlikely to take place in near to midterm.

### **Dynamics of the Greater Central Asian Concept**

In strategic and contextual terms both India and the US subscribe to this concept. From both countries' perspective the success of this concept is centred on stability in Af-Pak, a fact that has been recognised by the Obama Administration which has given primacy to resolution of Afghan conflict with Taliban as the most serious foreign policy agenda of his administration. The essence of Obama's strategy in Pakistan and Afghanistan can be summed up as under:-

*We will fight in Afghanistan till we are able to develop the capability in Afghan security forces to effectively tackle the al Qaeda-bad Taliban threat. We will do all we can [more carrots than sticks] so that Pakistan fights the al Qaeda-bad Taliban inside their nation for us'.*

Balance is only an elaboration of this central theme. The central pillar of this policy is outlined in surge to beef up counter-terrorism capability, strengthening Afghan security forces, reconstruction and assistance in socio

economic development through strengthening democratic and public institutions, building up public advocacy programmes, strengthening provincial reconstruction efforts etc.. Craig Mullaney, Under Secretary for Defence (Central Asia) commenting on Obama's statement that the largesse to Pakistan is not a blank cheque and in fact a down payment for the future and added that, this is also a kind of stimulus package for Central Asia. How true is that? Only time will tell as the details of implementation of this strategy are yet to unfold. Apparently from India's point of view as also of other regional stakeholders too much trust and reliance is being placed on Pakistan Army and ISI combine. Moreover, large sections of the US administration remain skeptical about Pakistan security establishment being part of the solution.

In Pakistan, the objective of Pakistani military and political establishment is to clearly shift the focus in time to defeat the fast expanding Islamic insurgency that is devouring the nation. Within above broad parameters the focus is on strengthening Pakistan's weak political institutions, making political parties rooted in feudal loyalties more accountable and last but most importantly recasting Pakistani military, stuck in the groove of traditional conventional warfare against India, to undertake pro-active counter-terrorist operations. These are at best generational challenges, but as being predicted by number of local and international analysts Pakistan does not have the luxury of time.

Thus, the so called Af-Pak strategy just lays down broad contours of the US Administration's thought process and defined objectives that it seeks. The fact that it is seeking to create a contact group encompassing eleven regional players indicates to the fact that America would like to broad base the solution and invoke regional players as concerned stake holders. Af-Pak strategy has many positive elements in it and its results are likely to appear within a year's time. Depending upon its success or otherwise, it may have to undergo changes because geo-strategic compulsions of the US would prevent the US leaving the region in a hurry.

### **Grand Bargain to Realise Greater Central Asia Strategy: Both Non-Starters**

The "Grand Bargain" is meant to rescue the situation in Afghanistan, by re-establishing relations between key South Asian stakeholders on the basis of cooperation and enlightened self-interest. The USA is keen to broker a genuine rapprochement between India and Pakistan – with hopes of sealing a deal over Kashmir. The aim being to strengthen Pakistan's civilian democracy vis-à-vis the military and conservatives, and, to induce them to make sincere efforts to crush al-Qaeda and Taliban in Eastern and South Eastern Afghanistan and Western Pakistan. Within the above construct, a supporting theme is to induct moderate Taliban into the Afghan government in a spirit of reconciliation and accommodation. The hope being that Afghan government, assisted by the democracies of India and possibly Pakistan, would become a bulwark of stability in the region providing substance to greater Central Asian framework.

However, the aftermath of the Mumbai attack reveals that the ambitious goals for this vigorous exercise in multilateralism remain unachievable at least from the Indian perspective. The problems are too complex and the abilities of the US and its coalition partners to project credible power into the region too small – to prevent violence from driving the outcome.

The Mumbai attacks have revealed fissures and conflicting alliances across Asia, that bode ill for the "Grand Bargain". Experts had hoped that it would replace the American faltering military strategy for Afghanistan, and that would also give further impetus for realisation of the Greater Central Asia strategy as espoused by the US. The result, however, is skewed narratives, distorted policies, an unavoidable but counter-productive American reliance on arm-twisting instead of persuasion, and a visceral Pakistani opposition to the US policies.

Fighting Islamic militancy was wrongly conceived, in terms of denying terrorists sanctuary in a single state, in what was and indeed is an overarching security structure in the South-Central Asian region as a whole that requires dealing with the root cause of the phenomenon. That root cause is the nature, ideology, and historical behaviour of the military-security services complex that has ruled Pakistan since the 1950's, and has traditionally manipulated the USA to serve its own ends.

The US approach also ignores the deep ideological basis of ties between Rawalpindi and its jihadi assets and overlooks the *raison d'être* of military power in Pakistan i.e. to substantiate the notion of hostility with India. Enormous financial benefits flow to the army as a result of its holding real power in the country. The degree to which it sees continued conflict with India as essential to that power, providing legitimacy to its leitmotif of "Islam in danger."

The need of the time is a comprehensive policy framework that would include getting India fully on board. It should aim at containing fundamentalist geopolitical dynamics as also pressurising the Pakistani Army to become pro-active in dealing with Taliban and other extremist forces fast moving into the Pakistani core – east of Sindh river. Such a policy will allow creation of an overarching security structure to deal with the problem. Placatory policies are unlikely to succeed. Greater Central Asia Strategy and Grand Bargain are both non-starters, unless the fundamentals of the issues located in the inflexible thought processes of Pakistani security establishment are addressed.

### **Implications for India**

The concept of GCA revolves around connecting South Asia with Central Asia through multi-modal corridors particularly in transport and trade sectors; Afghanistan would be the fulcrum around which such activities are to be carried out in various directions. According to some estimates, India's trade with Europe, CIS, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, by 2015, could be to the tune of US \$ 500 to 600 billion annually provided GCA concept is realised. Even if twenty per cent of this trade were to pass by overland route through Afghanistan it would still

be US \$ 100-120 billion, a phenomenal amount. Pakistan’s exports to Central Asia are only \$ 10-15 million every year, and by denying India overland route in the process, it has lost billions of transit revenues<sup>3</sup>. At the moment both India and Pakistan are marginal economic players in Central Asia. In cooperation with each other, they can become significant players. The GCA strategy also finds resonance with India because of the potential of realising Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipelines, if and when stability returns to Af-Pak region. Integrating Central and South Asia are part and parcel of India’s long term strategic perspective. Fructifying of GCA would result in vast economic benefits to all the stakeholders leading to a positive outcome for stability and security in the region.

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