

Central Asian Region Security Issues: Conditions, Dynamics and Perspectives*

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The Central-Asian Region (CAR) is of much greater interest to the world today than any other region. Many forces are competing to carve out a sphere of influence. This is clearly discernible from American actions. The US forces are conducting anti-terrorist operations in Afghanistan using complex political and ethnic divisions in the country. They are also strengthening their influence in Central Asia by acting against criminal elements amongst the civil population involved in production and transit of drugs.

The increasing importance of the region is governed by two main factors. The first is its geostrategic location. Central Asia lies at the junction of the Eurasian international transport corridor and has vast transportation and communication network. Countries of the region have an access to the Persian Gulf through Iran; to the Indian Ocean through Afghanistan and Pakistan; and the Asia-Pacific region across China. Central location of the region in the Eurasian heartland enhances its strategic importance from the point of view of its impact on security and stability in significant parts of Eurasia. The second factor is the presence of large reserves of natural resources such as oil, gas and other minerals in Central Asia. Many big states have shown keen interest in the exploration of these deposits based on their specific strategic needs, e.g. exercising control on the fuel and energy resources and to gain a secure corridor for their transportation.

According to some experts, the above two factors have the potential of turning the CAR into a focal point of the globalisation process and geopolitical confrontations. There are many problems in Central Asia which are impacting adversely on the development of this region. Many problems arise due to terrorism, activities of extremist groups, religious persecution, separatism, drug trafficking from Afghanistan etc.

Analysis of the situation in the CAR shows that future development of countries is directly connected to: *firstly*, rise in the potential of conflict due to the following factors:-

- (a) Aggravation of political and military situation in Afghanistan.
- (b) Social and political instability in Kyrgyzstan.
- (c) Imposition and strengthening of the Islamic extremist influence on society.
- (d) Adverse impact of global financial crisis on the economies of the CAR.
- (e) Aggravation of interstate contradictions from their border management policies, sharing of water and energy resources, and other conflicting interests.
- (f) Existence of long lasting internal dissensions amongst the ruling elite of major countries in the region.

Secondly, world's major powers are actively engaged in the geopolitical struggle to gain control over energy sources and transportation routes, to establish military bases and to influence the foreign policies of Central Asian states.

Thirdly, there is a growing deterioration in bilateral relations between leaders and erosion of interstate economic cooperation which had developed during the Soviet regime. We can also observe transformation in the regional security system and stability of states in Central Asia due to the following factors:-

- (a) Instability in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRA).
- (b) Geostrategic activities of external forces.

Despite the Russian decline; currently, transportation of energy resources in the region and the need for countering the Afghan-Islamic factor remains strategically important for them. Due to historical and geopolitical reasons Russia is more interested in influencing the socio-economic processes and has the most powerful levers to do so. Moscow continues to exercise its influence at the highest levels by actively using their economic clout and integral structures such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), EurAsian Economic Community (EurASEC) and Customs Union. Russia continues to dominate the Central Asian states by its military presence in the region; strengthening economic links; developing new raw materials and hydro-power resources; controlling the transportation routes of oil and gas and creating mutual information and cultural space. Russia is not interested in diversification of national economies in this region, as this process may reduce its influence and also lead to the development of alternative economic projects (without Russian participation). The long-term strategy of Russia in Central Asia takes into account the creation and adoption of a systemic approach to enhance its influence in the region.

Both, the USA as well as Russia, regard the CAR as a '*zone of own strategic interests*'. The Eurasian strategy of Washington is based on the concept of, "*The Great Central Asia*", which would attract the regional states to render support for their military operations in Afghanistan. The US policy is primarily aimed at monitoring the fuel-energy resources and the transportation routes through the CAR states.

Due to the proximity of Russia, China and Iran to the CAR: political and military presence of the USA has significant strategic importance. The US operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan would have direct political impact on Russia and China; and also on Iran, if the US decides to strike its nuclear facilities. Washington is trying to limit the presence of other states in CAR apprehending that the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China and the Islamic World have the capacity to reduce its influence in the region. The US is particularly keen to secure a transit system through Central Asia, using the so-called, "*The Northern Distribution Network*" (the northern route) to provide

logistic support to International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. They are, therefore, building new training bases and rendering financial aid to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Generally, the US strategy in Central Asia does not consider investment in the social and economic development of the CAR countries.

Under the cover of struggle against the terrorism in Central Asia, the US is trying to: *firstly*, not allow integration of CIS countries; *secondly*, to take control of the energy resources and to benefit from communication network in the CAR; *thirdly*, to provide themselves a strategic presence in the deep rear of China – taking into account China's rise as a world power; and *fourthly*, to exercise control on “intractable” Iran. It should be noted that the US interests in CAR fit into their concept of ‘*economic globalisation and evolution of unipolar world*’. The military bases in Central Asia provide the USA with control over continental part of Asia, as well as, main strategic areas almost in all the Asian countries. Under specific contingencies, the US military bases in Central Asia would help them in exerting military pressure on Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan and India. Military presence can also be used by the USA to manage regional contradictions and to support various informal political organisations in order to influence the governments of countries in the region.

China's policy towards Central Asia is strategically long-term. Due to political considerations, Beijing realises the futility of early revelation of its ambitious plans in the region; but activities showing their intent, to strengthen its position, have been observed. The Chinese presence in the region is expected to increase gradually and would be directly related to the decline in Russian and American influences. The PRC considers the CAR as its own prepotency as a source of energy and natural resources. By using its own rich economic potential, Beijing is gradually building its relations with the countries of the region. Currently, the main strategic task for China is to strengthen its own position in the region to meet its vast economic aspirations. China's enormous financial and investment potential facilitate an easy access into economic processes in the region.

Recently, an increase in the volume of Chinese investment in Central Asian countries economy has been noted – especially in the development of oil and gas fields, and other trades as well. China is giving more attention to the transportation projects, including construction of the pipeline network. Overall, the Chinese policy is aimed at protecting its strategic interests in three directions. *First*, is a part of the main strategy which seeks to create a safe and stable neighbourhood around China. The main instrument in this direction is the SCO, in which China holds a dominant position. This regional organisation will help Beijing in implementing its policy in Central Asia. *Second*, is to establish close political and economic ties with the countries of the region; and the *third*, is to use the Central Asian factor to establish relations with two other major players in the region – Russia and the USA. An important aspect of foreign policy cooperation between China and Central Asian states is the problem of border security, especially in Xinjiang. Beijing will focus on controlling the ever increasing potential of conflict in Xinjiang by keeping a check on separatist's moves.

In spite of relatively low geopolitical interest in economic terms, the EU continues to demonstrate its increased interest in big projects in Central Asia, Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. Most of the infrastructure projects in the CAR are partially integrated into the programme of the EU Commission to establish transport information highway termed as, ‘*Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA)*’. The European factor, as a special force in the region, is viewed as such. The EU perceives CAR as a “buffer filter”. The EU is keen to provide more support to counter the spread of terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking, which are affecting the national security of European states also.

Generally, the above mentioned factors indicate that Central Asia has become a ‘*zone of intersection*’ of the world and that leading powers' interests significantly impact the changes taking place in the region. A few developments which have aggravated the situation in the region are: hard socio-political issues; trans-border-territorial and water sharing problems; economic, religious and ethnic contradictions. The complex internal problems which influence the economic development and regional security of CAR states are discussed in the succeeding paragraphs.

The economic development, primarily in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan (RK) and the Republic of Tajikistan (RT), has been declining; although, it is observed that Uzbekistan (RU) and Turkmenistan are less affected. The main problems being faced by these countries are :-

- (a) Extreme poverty.
- (b) Poor quality of public health and care services.
- (c) Lack of permanent earnings.
- (d) High level of corruption and inflation.
- (e) Lack of industrial-technical development base.
- (f) Decline in demand for exports.
- (g) Drop in investment and business activities.

The overall decline in traditional sectors of the economy has primarily resulted from low agricultural development – specially in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Another important factor is the ‘*slow economic integration*’ between the CAR countries. Absence of long-term social and economic programmes have also contributed to the growth of social tensions. These problems are causing further stratification of the society. Lack of permanent sources of earnings is leading to mass exodus of able-bodied population to the nearby states. This is typical of Tajikistan; where about 50 per cent of the people, mostly men in search of work, are compelled to leave the state. Tajikistan Armed Forces have faced problems in filling-up vacancies due to non availability of suitable candidates.

Declining levels of education is another problem which is affecting further development of countries in the region.

At the beginning of Independence, enough people with strong basic education were available, however, likelihood of losing them is increasing with the passage of time. The system of education in Central Asian countries needs a review and modification to meet present day requirements. Most of the problems have arisen due to lowering of expenditure on education. Inadequate attention for developing human resources is another reason which has affected the growth of production and economy in the Central Asian countries.

The growing intensity of protests in CAR should be seen in the background of low social standards of the people, harsh political regimes and current events in the Middle East, North Africa and in some Central Asian countries. In April, 2010, social protests instigated the change of political power in Kyrgyzstan. However, even the new leadership is still unable to overcome the socio-economic difficulties.

These days, signs of crisis developing in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are also visible. Illegal meetings between dissatisfied people have taken place. The leadership takes strong action against activities aimed at destabilising the situation in the country. For example, the Uzbek authorities have intensified the activities of their Special Forces to identify and isolate such elements. In addition, controls over media broadcasts reporting events in the Middle East and North Africa have been strengthened. The Uzbek and Tajik authorities are particularly concerned about the connection of some secular opposition groups with the Radical Islamic Organisations (RIO).

Significant growth in the popularity of extremist ideologies has been observed in Central Asia. It is lesser in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. However, in Kyrgyzstan, the activities of various extremist organisations such as '*The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)*' and '*Hizb-ul-Tahrir*' demonstrate the failure of the authorities to check the imposition of radical Islam ideology. As a result, the ranks of RIO are constantly replenished with young people, to help them create a reserve of manpower. The main goal of the RIO is to create "*The Islamic Caliphate*" across the CAR territory.

Since the beginning of 2011, restrictions have been imposed on religious movements promoted by extremist elements located in Pakistan, Turkey and China (Xinjiang) or by people who have undergone special training in extremist Islamic ideology. Central Asian countries are increasing their control over the activities of Islamic educational institutions and spread of the extremist ideology. Some foreign students, studying in Islamic institutions have been returned to their countries. However, strong measures taken by the authorities to suppress the growth of radical Islam have been wrongly perceived as denigration of religious principles, by some members of the public.

The borders of the modern Central Asian states were drawn without taking into account the historical settlements of ethnic groups. This may cause inter-ethnic conflicts in the future. Today, the potential for conflict revolves around the Fergana Valley - which geographically includes the territory of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. This area is problematic because collapse of the Soviet Union has left behind unresolved issues regarding the '*disputed enclaves*' in Fergana Valley. There are six enclaves in Kyrgyzstan; four are in Uzbekistan (Cox, Shakhimardan, Jong-Gara, Dzhangayl) and two in Tajikistan (Vorukhand Western Kalach). The Republics of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have two enclaves (Barack and Sarvak). These enclaves in CAR lead to social and political tensions between neighbouring countries. Regular disputes, related to pastures and water sharing, frequent closure of territory by Uzbekistan, extortion by border guards and mining on border lands provoke inter-ethnic and interstate conflicts around the enclaves. Illegal arms and drug trafficking, counterfeit goods of Chinese origin and illegal migration are carried out intensively in these areas. Such activities lead to conflict between the main ethnic groups (Tajiks, Uzbeks, Kirghiz) living in the area.

The Fergana Valley is a "dangerously explosive" region, as majority of the people living here have negative attitude towards the central authorities. Internal and political problems between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have continued for a long time; which may turn into cross-border conflicts, and interstate confrontation with Uzbekistan. According to the Uzbek leadership estimates, the emissaries of 'religious extremist forces' are trying to take advantage of the situation and calling for support of the Uzbek diaspora in Kyrgyzstan. The Uzbekistan authorities are also troubled by the intensification of RIO in Sughd region of Tajikistan. It is important to note that Fergana Valley is historically a stronghold of Islamic activity in Central Asia. Since the beginning of 2000, it has become a region frequented by armed RIO fighters. Most of the tragic events of modern history have occurred in this region: "blood purge" of the Meskhetian Turks (1989); the Kirghiz-Uzbek riots (1990); the invasion of illegal armed groups Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in Kyrgyzstan (1999 and 2000); the Andijan Uprising (2005); and the massive fights between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbeks (2010). The latent nature of conflicts in Central Asia points towards the possibility of the region being turned into a zone where military forces would play a significant role. The low-intensity conflicts in the region have the potential of increasing the risk of Kazakhstan's involvement also.

Traditionally, complex relationships between the heads of Central Asian states had helped in solving of problems in this region; but presently, the diversity in views regarding the development of the region have significantly increased the vulnerability of Central Asia. The main problems of CAR are summarised in succeeding paragraphs.

It should be noted that water disputes in Central Asia have caused intrastate and international conflicts. The countries, with abundant water resources use it as lever to put pressure on some users. The problems connected with the use of water from the rivers Syr Darya and Amu Darya, between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, also increase the potential of conflict between countries. At present, the situation around Rogun Hydroelectric Station (HES) in Tajikistan is causing anxiety. The Uzbek authorities have repeatedly objected against its construction.

The Tajik-Uzbek relations remain strained because of complex interpersonal relations between the two presidents. Economically, Tajikistan depends entirely on Uzbekistan because its main communications with other CIS states run through Uzbekistan. Due to existing political disagreement between the two countries, Uzbekistan often impedes the movement of Tajik transport through its territory; and as a result, Tajikistan sometimes is confronted with complete economic blockade. Along with this, Uzbekistan often stops the supply of gas and electricity to Tajikistan, which affects the economic activities adversely, causes much hardship and significant rise in food prices.

Another major factor, which destabilises relations between the two countries, are the minefields laid along the Tajik-Uzbek borders. These obstacles are installed by Uzbekistan to prevent the ingress of RIO militants into the country from the territory of Tajikistan. In case of deterioration of relations with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan may try to destabilise the situation by using the religious extremist forces and other destructive elements under its control. The absence of political compromise and mutual trust amongst the leaders of Central Asian states is impacting the integration processes in the region critically.

Lastly, the problem regarding the resolution of legal status of the Caspian Sea is affecting the relations between neighbouring states. The increase in military capabilities and existence of disputed oil fields in the region also aggravate the political and military situation.

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