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Russia and USA competition in the central Asian Republics

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Abstract

Central Asia has vital geo-economic, geo-political and geo-strategic location in the world. In the past, this region was the part of the USSR. These republics got independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. This region has abundance of untapped natural resources. All the major powers including the Russia, USA, China and European countries have been trying to build cordial relations with these republics in order to increase their sphere of influence on the one hand and to utilize their energy resources on the other hand. The purpose of this study is to highlights the role as well as competition between the Russia and the USA in the Central Asian region. Both states have been maneuvering for geo- economic, geo-political and geo-strategic interests and hence containing each other. Qualitative research methodology along with explanatory and interpretive approaches is used in this study. Both primary and secondary sources for data collection are also used in it.

Keywords: Competition, rivalry, geo-strategic, geo-economic, geo-political, Russia, USA.



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Introduction

Central Asian Republics have unique geostrategic, geo-political and geo-economic position in Asia particularly and in the world generally. Owing to this significance, it is called the 'Heart of Asia'. Before the disintegration of the USSR, these republics were the part of the Soviet Union. They did not have independent identity. After the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, these republics along with several other states got independence from the yoke of the Soviet Union. The states which got the titled of the Central Asian republics were the Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Ibn I Batuta called it the region of Turkmenistan (Rashid, 2003). Although they separated from the USSR, yet Russia has still influence on them. Russia influences and shapes their domestic and foreign policies. These states have several commonalities and differences. They have commonalities of history, culture and religion. They have also differences about ethnic issues, economic conditions and foreign relations.

Central Asian region is rich in natural resources. It has huge untapped natural resources. It has abundance of the reservoirs of petroleum and natural gas. Caspian Sea has the largest natural resources reservoirs. According to Berivan, it has 50 to 110 billion barrels of oil and 170 to 463 trillion cubic feet of natural gas (Berivan, 2009). It always remained source of attractions to the several actors not only in the past but also significant in the contemporary era and will also be in the future period. In the past, it remained entangled in the tussle between the great powers. Both the USSR and the Great Britain wanted to control the region extended from Afghanistan to Central Asian region. Finally, Afghanistan was made buffer zone between the both powers and hence the both powers remained in their sphere of influence.

It has significant geostrategic importance in the world. As far as its geography is concerned; China is situated in its east, Caspian Sea in the west, Russia in the north and Afghanistan in the south. In this way, it plays the role of bridge between the east-west and the north-south as it connects the eastern countries with the western countries and Asia to Europe. It is because it situated in the center of Eurasia. That is why; it is called as 'pivot of Asia'. It also covers and attaches to the region of Europe, the Middle East, the South East Asia and South Asia. Moreover, Central Asian region is land locked region due to no access to the sea directly.

Their natural resources are the major cause of the attraction of the world powers and make the region pivotal in the global politics. The world powers want to build their relations and expand their sphere of influence in order to tap the natural resources and meet their domestic needs. The most predominant states interested in this region are the Russia, and USA. Each state has eye on its natural resources and also wants dominant role in the region. Each state wants to contain the influence of other state. This struggle for influence in the region has started 'new great game' in the region. New great game in Central Asia has both opportunities as well as challenges.

Background

Central Asia is predominantly multi-ethnic region. Each state's name is taken from its ethnic group having majority of its people residing in the respective state. For example, Kazakhstan state has the majority of its population is Kazakhs; Uzbekistan has the majority of Uzbeks and so on and so for. However, it does not mean that people belonging to other ethnic groups are not dwelling there. Other people belonging to different tribes such as Tajiks, Turks, etc are also living there. The reason is that different Turks tribes and ethnic groups came into this area and settled there. So, Turks is the major tribe whereas other different tribes are the offshoot of it. That is why; Rashid called the whole region as 'Turkistan'(Rashid, 2003).

Likewise, the Turk Kanate was originated in the 16th century in the region. Later on, the subtribe of the Turks, Kazakhstan, came in the region and settled there in the 17th century.

Gradually, these tribes became weak and Mongol, the emerging another powerful tribe, captured the region and took the control of the region and ruled over it for a long time. With the passage of time, many Russian soldiers and traders settled in Central Asia. Gradually, Russian also became one of the largest ethnic group residing across the Central Asian region. It gave opportunity to the Tsarist regime to capture the whole region. So, this region remained under the Czarist regime for a long time. The Tsarist regime ended when the Bolshevik revolution came in Soviet Union in October 1918 under the leadership of the Lenin. So, when communist regime came into being, the then autonomous regions of the Central Asia were gradually amalgamated in the Soviet Union. Turkmenistan, Bukhara, Khorezm, Kyrgyz and Kazakh autonomous regions were forcefully amalgamated respectively in the Communist led Soviet Union. This amalgamation process continued till the 1930s. However, when Stalin came into power, he changed the political borders of the Central Asian Region along ethnic lines in 1924. This region remained under the USSR till the disintegration of the USSR. The Central Asian Republics, finally, got independence after the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 and each dominated ethnic group succeeded to get their separate states.

Literature Review

Starr (May 2023) says that USA recognized the independence of the Central Asian Republics soon after their separation from the Soviet Union. It also recognized their independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. USA and these republics have common challenges at national and international levels such as Ukraine war, shift in major powers and economic and social changes. USA extended its strategy 2019-2025 for advancing sovereignty and economic prosperity of the Central Asian region. But USA has failed to acknowledge and appreciate the Central Asian Republics centrality to American interests. It is because America takes these states as clueless client. It left the region without providing security and economic alternatives.

Aliyev (2020) says that the new USA's Central Asia Policy is to support for better connected, more prosperous and more secure Central Asia. The geographical distance, emerging Chinese economic involvement in the region and the strong Russian political and security ties with these republics have increased US concerns and hence US renewed interests in the Central Asian region. That is why; Trump administration committed to enhance its relations with the regional states.

Kakenova (2014) says that Central Asian region has pivotal position in the global politics. Central Asian Republics had to face numerous problems after their independence. The precarious geopolitical condition and proximity to the great powers influences their foreign policy and enhances security concerns. During the 1990 decade, USA followed the policy to contain the Russian and Chinese influence in the region, prevent extremism, halt the corridor of illegal drug trafficking, promote civil society of these republics and to provide access to the American companies to energy resources of the region. After the 9/11, USA extended military and political cooperation to check the Russian nuclear weapons stationed in Kazakhstan and to counter terrorism in Afghanistan.

Laruelle (2014) says that Russia is a significant external actor though lost the economic leverage in the Central Asian region. It is the former colonial master and hence continues to shape the regional future policies. Both have common issues particularly the security issues, threats of drug trafficking, risk of the Islamist penetration and unchecked labor migration. Now, Russia has realized and recognized the Chinese and USA influence in the region and ready to deal them in

the region. But it still shapes the regional strategic and economic orientation towards the Eurasian integration.

Oliphant (2013) says that Russia is the most pivotal external actor in the Central Asia. It is because Russia has strong security arrangements, high level political ties and vibrant investment projects in Central Asia. But it has lost the number one status in investment in the region due to the high level Chinese involvement in these republics. However, it continues to dominate in security arrangements. Now, it wants to accomplish its own interests rather than to act as policeman in the region. Hence, Central Asian Republics are the last resort of the Russian sphere of influence outside its border

Research Methodology

In this study, qualitative research methodology has been used. Inductive reasoning and interpretive and explanatory approaches are also used in it. Both primary and secondary sources are used for data collection. The primary sources of the data collections are the official reports of the US government and the Central Asian states and the statements of their key office holders. The secondary sources are the published books, journals and newspapers, etc.

Russia and Central Asian Republics

Russia has strong political, economic and security ties with the Central Asian Republics. The deteriorating condition of the USSR due to economic and military fragility compelled the Soviet Union to give independence to the Central Asian Republics. Both the CARs and Russia decided to carry their relations in the following domains.

Commonwealth of the Independent States

The Central Asian region was vital for the Soviet Union's geo-strategic, geopolitical and geo-economics interests. It did not want to lose these states free from its influence and control. Therefore, it was decided to establish a mechanism that would cement these states with the Russian Federation. So, Commonwealth of the Independent States was established in order to keep close relations between the Central Asia Republics and the Russia on the one hand and among the republics on the other hand. Vassilliev (2009) says, "The establishment of the Commonwealth of the Independent States (CIS) in 1991 heralded new chapter in relations between Russian Federation and the Central Asian States". There are many forces of compulsion and attractions between the Russian Federations and the Central Asian Republics. Soviet Union pays highly concentration to these states. According to Muratbekova (2023), "Having Asia origin, Muslim identity and profound knowledge and understanding of the language and civilization processes of the East; Central Asian people have a special place in Soviet foreign policy". The major areas and domains of relations between the Soviet Union and the central Asian states are the geo-strategic, geo-political, geo-economics and the infrastructural developments.

Containment of the USA in the Central Asian Region

After the collapse of the Soviet Union generally and the 9/11 particularly, the involvement of the USA has been increased in the region drastically. USA has too almost the similar interest in the region as the Soviet Union has. The major policies of the USA in the region are the promotion of democracy, protection of human rights, and extraction of natural resources in order to meet its domestic needs and to combat the extremists, fundamentalists, militants and the terrorists in Afghanistan and the Central Asia region particularly and across the globe generally. Thus, it built its military bases in the Central Asian republics. Soviet Union and USA are rival on many fronts. Both contain each other in the world. Soviet Union considers these bases against its vital

geostrategic interest in the region. Therefore, it wishes to maintain its geostrategic relations with these republics in order to minimize the American interference in the region. Moreover, being neighbor of the Central Asian Republics, Russia and China are also key actors in geo-political and geo-strategic, energy resources, military and defense purposes and hegemony of the region. Both want strategic cooperation with the Central Asian Republics. Both have fear of the increasing USA's involvement in the region. They want to build a security mechanism for the region similar to the NATO in order to minimize the USA's influence. Therefore, the whole region is integrated through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

Geo-Political and Geo-Economic Interests of the Russia

As far as geopolitical interests of the Soviet Union are concerned, Soviet Union wants to maintain its political clout on the republics. Almost the rulers of these republics are the authoritarian dictators who are the soviet era officials. Most of the rulers are more inclined towards Soviet Union. Soviet Union supports these rulers to combat internal and external challenges confronting to these states for instance to combat militants, terrorism, extremism, drug traffickers, etc. In geo-economic domains, Soviet Union also wishes to continue its relations with these republics. These republics are very rich in reservoirs of natural resources such as gas and petroleum and other raw materials such as cotton and agricultural items. Although Soviet Union has also its enough energy resources, it wants relations with them for getting energy resources and extracting raw materials to meet its domestic needs for a long time and to maintain its resources stocks on the one hand and to sell it to the European countries for the earning of profits. For political and economic clout, these republics are incorporated in Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in order to frame these states into regional integration.

Infrastructural Development

The infrastructural development of the Central Asia Republics also boosts relationship between these states and the Soviet Union. The infrastructure of these states is not adequate to meet the needs. These republics are rich in natural resources but they have obsolete and poor infrastructure. They are unable to trade with each other and the across the world as well. It further wants to restore of the Soviet era communication and trade infrastructure between the Soviet Union and the Asian states. It also wishes to revive the former North-South transportation corridor from Russian Baltic Ports down to Volga River and across the Caspian Sea to Central Asia and Iran to Pakistan and India. This development of relation is not one way. The Central Asian Republics have also need the cooperation of the Russia if they want to be developed. So, their reciprocal and mutual interests compel the both the Russia and the Central Asia Republics to build and carry on harmonious, amicable and workable relations. Their way forward lies in it.

USA and Central Asian Republics

USA was among the first countries that recognized the independence of the Central Asian Republics in 1991(Blackwood, 2021). It supports the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of these states. The strategy of the USA to the Central Asia is to build more stable and prosperous central Asia that act free in political, economic and security interests (Ibid). Moreover, USA has given \$9billion to direct assistance to these states in last three decades to strengthen security, economy, and democracy and fulfill the humanitarian needs (Ibid). Europe and USA want to build relations with these nations of Central Asian in order to get access to the natural resources. Russia and China also maintain their influence on the region. Both have interests in the natural resources of the region. They also do not see the presence of the Europe generally and the USA particularly in the region due to their geopolitical, geostrategic and geo-economics

rivalries. The USA led NATO presence in the region due to the war on terrorism and having air bases in the Central Asian republics were also the cause of concern for the Russia and China. Blackwood (2021) says that all the five Central Asian Republics provided the USA the military air bases and hosted US forces. The Kyrgyzstan leased bases to USA from 2001 to 2014 and Uzbekistan leased bases to USA from 2001 to 2005(Ibid). USA has separate relations with each state which are as under: -

Kazakhstan and USA

Kazakhstan and USA has developed strong bilateral relations soon after its independence. Commander of US central command, General Joseph L. Votel, says that US relations with Kazakhstan are ‘the most mature and forward thinking in the central Asia (Blackwood, 2021). Nuclear threat reduction is also the area of bilateral relationship between the both states. Kazakhstan cooperated with America to maintain nuclear material and to dismantle infrastructure of the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program and USA gave \$ 275 million to Kazakhstan to dismantle the weapons of mass destruction and relevant infrastructure since 1991(US Department of State, January 20, 2021).Through the USA-Kazakhstan Energy partnership which was formulized in 2001, Kazakhstan cooperated with American Energy Department on nuclear security and nuclear energy(US Department of Energy).

Another significant aspect of bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and USA is military to military contacts. Kazakhstan has been hosting Exercise Steppe Eagle since 2003. It is multilateral military exercises for emphasizing on peacekeeping capabilities. Next area of bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and USA is counter narcotic. Kazakhstan is hub for heroin and other opiates. It plays the role of transit from Afghanistan to Russia and to Europe. Moreover, America has opened its regional office for countering narcotics in Almaty. That is why, US Department says that Kazakhstan and USA ties in law enforcement and military are strong and growing (US Department of State, August 3, 2018). America ought to enhance its capacity to check the drug trafficking and other criminal activities. America has been assisting Kazakhstan in promoting human rights, democratic values, rule of laws and media development. Moreover, it supports economic reforms and to enhance renewable energy and its efficiency (US Department of State, 2022). In short, USA supporting Kazakhstan in security sectors primarily enhancing military partnership, combating narcotics transition and weapons of mass destruction (Ibid).

Kyrgyzstan and USA

USA recognized the independence of Kyrgyzstan soon after its independence. USA opened a Transit center at Manas and supported the operation of Enduring Freedom and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kyrgyzstan from 2001 to 2014. Relations between the both states deteriorated under the president Almazbek Atambayev from 2011 to 2017 but bilateral relations improved under president Jeenbekov from 2017 to 2020. USA wants to enhance bilateral relations in fighting terrorism and extremism and to extend cooperation in security and stability. It also wants to promote democracy and business environment in Kyrgyzstan (US Department of State, November 16, 2018). Relations between the both states deteriorated when the US government gave the award of defender of human rights to Azimjon Askarov in 2015. The Kyrgyz government ended the BCA bilateral agreemnt signed in 1993. Under this agreement, USA had to assist the Kyrgyz government in humanitarian and technical economic assistance. BCA agreement was restored under the new Kyrgyz government. US gave assistance \$ 31.4 million to Kyrgyz government for fiscal year 2022. The objectives of the assistance were to promote democracy, strengthen civil society, independence of media, rule of law, promotion of good governance,

combat extremism, professionalizing its military and safely managing its conventional munitions stockpiles (US Department of State, 2022). Relations further deteriorated when Trump banned visa travel to the Kyrgyz citizens due to non-complying in information-sharing criteria, faults in Kyrgyz passports and passports issuance process (The White House, January 31, 2020). Kyrgyz government condemned the Trump restrictions and said that it had caused significant damage to the relations between the both countries (Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic , February 1, 2020). However, relations again improved when new president Joe Biden annulled the Trump administration banned on the Kyrgyz's visa passport (The White House, January 20, 2021).

Tajikistan and USA

USA has been working together with Tajikistan since its inception. Tajikistan with the help of USA wants regional integration in the region. It also supported US led Nato forces in Afghanistan and collaborated with USA in restoring peace and stability in Afghanistan. Moreover, USA supports Tajikistan in public health programs including nutrition, tuberculosis, maternal and child health. USA also backs Tajikistan to establish democratic institutions, and to promote pluralism in civil society and politics. It also enables the Tajik government to modernize its educational system and to address the issue of climate change. In economic sector, US supports Tajikistan in promoting agricultural sector and enhancing private sector competitiveness. USA also supports Tajikistan in security domains. It provides Tajikistan equipment and training to its relevant agencies to counter narcotics, drugtrafficking, terrorism, extremism and nuclear proliferation (US Department of State). USA gave Tajikistan \$48.4 million during the fiscal year of 2022 to assist in these areas.

Turkmenistan and USA

USA recognized the independence of Turkmenistan and its policy of neutrality in foreign policy. Owing to its policy of neutrality, relations between the both states remained slow. However, its energy reservoirs and geography has potential for strategic partnership with USA though its close nature and uninviting investment environment slow down its relations with USA. The main area of bilateral relations between the both is regional security. USA assists Turkmenistan to enhance its security capability and border security. In this way, it wants to counter the Russian and Chinese influence in Turkmenistan. It further assists Turkmenistan in establishing Turkmenistan special forces, english language training and medical engagements. USA gave \$4.1 million to Turkmenistan for cooperation in developing stability in Afghanistan, to boost its business environment, promote diversify economy, promote good governance and combat human trafficking.

Uzbekistan and USA

USA recognized the independence of Uzbekistan soon after its inception. But their relations remained robust till 2002. The main focus of their relationship was the security issues particularly regarding the Afghanistan issue. President Karimov visited USA in 2002 and signed an agreement of strategic partnership and cooperation. Their relations deteriorated in 2005 when the Uzbek government killed approximately 100 civilians due to unrest in Andijan, the eastern city of Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan unyielded to the foreign criticism and banned the NGOs, INGOs, and international media. It also ended peace corps program with USA and demanded the withdrawal of the USA forces staying in Karshi-khanabad air base for operating in Afghanistan (OSCE ODIHR, May 13, 2005). However, it continued to give logistical support to the NATO forces.

Being the part of the Northern Distribution Network, it continued to allow non-lethal shipments in its territory.

Relations between Uzbekistan and USA has been improving since 2016. USA has been supporting it in international engagements and its economic reforms. In May 2018, President Mirziyoyev visited USA and signed agreement 'new era of the strategic partnership' between the two nations (The White House, May 16, 2018). Trump considered this reengagement as reinvigoration of US-led C5+1 Framework, a high level forum for discussing regional matters (Imamova, 2019). Moreover, both countries have improved relations in bilateral trade. Bilateral trade has doubled in the period of 2017-2018. The secretary of the US Department of Commerce said that "there are significant opportunities in strengthening commerce and economic ties between the two states (US Embassy in Uzbekistan, 2019).

USA gives huge financial assistance to Uzbekistan. It has given \$44 million to Uzbekistan in the financial year of 2022. The purpose of this assistance is to support its reforms efforts especially the economic, educational, health, judicial, financial, and human rights, and to halt corruption. USA also assists Uzbekistan to strengthen its civil society, journalistic professionalism and parliament. It also supports Uzbekistan in its security matters particularly strengthening its forces in order to boost border security, counter terrorism and regional stability.

After the advent of 9/11 and the war on terrorism, the role of the USA and the European Union increased in the region due to strategic, defence, military, political and economic motives. USA secured air bases and land routes from these republics in order to combat the terrorism in Afghanistan particularly and in the Central Asian Republics generally. NATO forces, the combined military force of the USA and the Europe, launched operations to combat the terrorists. Besides it, they had motives to scratch resources from the republics to meet their energy needs.

Conclusion

Superpowers as well as nuclear powers also have presence in the region due to their bases in the several Central Asian republics. Any wrong action, misadventure and miscalculation may result in a nuclear war. In this way, it may be another battleground.

Contrary to the advantages of the geostrategic significance of the Central Asian region, it has to face several liabilities as well. It will produce dependency of the Central Asian republics on the donor's states. Their heavily reliance on these powers restrict them to reliance on their feet. This dependency will further result in the interference of the external actors in their internal matters. The external factors will determine their policies which further undermine their sovereignty. Moreover, their resources will be tapped and exploited by the foreign forces. They will come and use the resources. So, the heavy exploitation of the natural resources will leave the region in jeopardy. Further, each superpower has its own interests in the region. When their interests will collide, then the whole region will become the nuclear flashpoint. It will result in the destruction of the whole region. The presence of the external factors in the region can destabilize the region while igniting the differences on the basis of division of natural resources, racial, ethnic, etc. among the Central Asian Republics (Rashid, 2003). If these differences develop, then this region will face situation of civil war.

To sum up, Central Asian Republics have pivotal geostrategic significance. Its geography has importance in the region due to its proximity to the major powers. It links Asia and Europe as it is called gate way to Europe. It is an energy rich region having huge reservoir of natural gas and petroleum. Caspian Sea is the major energy resource area. So, this attracts the politics of the major powers in order to get energy and petroleum from the region and meet their domestic needs. Their

animosity and clash over interests may result in battleground. It will further destabilize the region. In short, Central Asian Republics have huge advantages if they use their geopolitical significance positively and judiciously.

Findings and Recommendations

Owing to the attractive geostrategic significance, the Central Asian republics have been taking benefits and advantages. All the interesting partners are investing in the region. The major investors are the China, Russia, USA and India. This foreign investment will improve the economic condition of the region. Trade with these major powers is also increasing. Direct economic and military assistance has also been given to them. USA, China and Russia are giving them weapons in order to strengthen their defense mechanism to fight terrorism. Further, these powers are also providing modern knowledge and technology to these states. Many of their students are studying in these states. But the involvement of the major powers in the region may result in new great game that further result in resources exploitation and develops chaos, anarchy and political instability in the entire region. Following are the recommendations for the betterment of the Central Asian region.

- Central Asian Republics should not heavily depend on the external actors rather to be self-reliant in their politico-economic matters.
- Central Asian Republics should not become the part of the new great game being played in the region.
- Central Asian Republics should maintain balance in relations with all the major powers.
- They should opt the policy of Central Asia led and Central Asia owned peace process.
- They should resolve their outstanding issues peacefully and without involving the external actors.
- Last but not the least; their resources are not to be exploited by the external players.

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