



VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

# **RUSSIAN, CHINESE AND AMERICAN INTERPLAY IN CENTRAL ASIA AND AFGHANISTAN OPTIONS FOR INDIA**



**Nirmala Joshi**

**Occasional Paper**

**August - 2017**

**RUSSIAN, CHINESE AND AMERICAN  
INTERPLAY IN CENTRAL ASIA AND AFGHANISTAN  
OPTIONS FOR INDIA**

*Nirmala Joshi*



**VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION**  
New Delhi

*Published in 2017 by*

**Vivekananda International Foundation**

3, San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri,  
New Delhi-110021, India

[www.vifindia.org](http://www.vifindia.org)

 [@vifiindia](https://twitter.com/vifiindia)

© Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF), September 2017

Designed & Printed by Alpha Graphics, New Delhi

All rights reserved. No part of this may be reproduced or utilized in any form, or any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

The view are that of the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher.

## The Author

**Prof Nirmala Joshi** is a former Professor of the Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies of the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi. Besides heading the Centre at the JNU, Prof Joshi has been a Research Advisor at the United Service Institution of India (USI), Director of the University Grants Commission's Programme on Russia and Central Asia, a member of the Indian Council for Social Science Research's Indo-Russian Joint Commission for Co-operation in Social Sciences, a Member of the University Grants Commission Standing Committee on Area Studies, and a Government of India nominated Member of the Executive Council of the Indian Council of World Affairs. Professor Nirmala Joshi has travelled extensively abroad and within the country to participate in international conferences on the Eurasian region. She has contributed several chapters to books and published articles in international and national research journals. She is currently the Director of a New Delhi based think tank, The India Central Asia Foundation and also a Distinguished Fellow at the USI.





## Foreword

The shift of geo-political focus towards the massive Asian continent, with its Eurasian landmass placed at the geographic hub, has led to the region being described as a 'pivot of history'. In the contemporary context, this geographic hub spreads over the Central Asian Region and in many ways, even Afghanistan. Political scientists and observers predict that whosoever gains the ability to exercise influence over that geographic heartland, would as a corollary find the rudder of global affairs in its hands.



The Central Asian region has substantial hydro-carbon and mineral resources. The region has been affected by terrorism and violent extremism. It is witness to inter-play of Russian, US and Chinese interests, which is manifested in different strands of co-operation and competition. While Russia has historical interests, China is playing an increasingly assertive role in the region. The countries of the region, however, are proud of their national identities, and are determined to chart their own course. PM Modi's visits to all the Central Asian Republics in July, 2015, underlines India's role and commitment to contribute to the region's development.

In this Paper, the author has examined the political, economic and aspirational interests of the above mentioned powers and the possible intents to achieve their objectives. Similarly, the concerns of the local countries are examined in relevant context and the motivations and possibilities recounted. Lastly, India's possible options in finding fruitful engagements with the contending powers and strengthening of good neighborhood relationships are discussed.

An interesting analysis of contemporary Asia-focused issues which I am sure that the readers would find interesting as well as educative.



**General NC Vij,**

PVSM, UYSM, AVSM (Retd)

**Director VIF**

Former Chief of the Army Staff &  
Founder Vice Chairman, NDMA

New Delhi  
Jul 2017

# **Russian, Chinese and American Interplay in Central Asia and Afghanistan : Options for India**

## **India's Interest in Central Asia**

In the evolving dynamics of the global order in the twenty first century there has been a fundamental shift in International Politics from Europe to Asia, and particularly to the huge Eurasian landmass. In this changing dynamics, British geographer Halford Mackinder's theory of geopolitics has regained a new and a powerful currency. According to Mackinder, Central Asia is the 'pivot of history', and the huge swathe of landmass is the "Heartlands of Eurasia". In his view whosoever 'controls the heartlands of Eurasia, controls the world'.

Today geopolitics is shaping the future of nations as well as that of the world order. The new world order that arose on the debris of the Cold War had two clear tendencies: cooperation and competition. The framework for understanding and analysing a country's interest has changed. It is primarily a change from the previous way of thinking of a zero-sum game to a new attitude of national interest and cooperation. A parallel trend that has existed, and continues to exist, is that of competition among powers for influence and control. In the evolving dynamics, two powers, the Russian Federation and the Peoples Republic of China, which are located in Eurasia, have the potential to play a role on the global scene. In the present context, Afghanistan is also being considered as part of the Central Asian geopolitical space. The United States of America (USA), a leading world power, though an external one, has the capability to play a pivotal role in Eurasia. The Eurasian region is a vast storehouse of raw materials - energy, gold, silver,



aluminum, uranium and rare metals, which has drawn the attention of the world. Another significant development is the changing concept of security. New sources of threats and challenges fueled by religious extremism, terrorism and aggressive nationalism have appeared in the region. These are the non-traditional threats carried out by non-state actors. It is the most pervasive challenge to international stability and security of nations. Global mobility and communication has greatly facilitated its transnational reach and made terrorism a widespread phenomenon.

Russia and China are two huge land powers. Located on the Eurasian landmass, they are also contiguous sharing a lengthy boundary. Historically both have been expansionist empires - Tsarist Russia in search of great power status, and its security and economic interests, whereas the Chinese empire in its quest to protect its lucrative trade along the Silk Road. History has witnessed periods of accommodation as well as rivalry between the two empires. This dual trend between Russia and China is visible even today despite the deepening of their strategic partnership. The Central Asian region has witnessed both the trends. In the on-going interplay some of the past aspects such as the quest for great power status are evident. It would not be wrong to assume that this quest would accentuate in the coming years.

The beginning of the 'war on terror', in the post 9-11 period, led to the stationing of forces of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) led by the United States (US) in Afghanistan. Western military presence fundamentally altered the geopolitical map of the Central Asian region. Similarly, the withdrawal of coalition troops in 2014 has again led to a new geopolitical situation – a situation of flux and uncertainty. The US can, however, play a pivotal role in the on-going interplay, if in its strategic thinking it perceives a serious challenge to its supremacy in global politics. Although the challenge to its leadership is not imminent, nevertheless, Russian-Chinese partnership in American interest needs to be monitored at the global level as well as at the regional levels. At the same time global issues such as fight against religious extremism and terrorism, climate change and protecting the global commons fosters cooperation. Stability of the Central Asian region is imperative need for all the three major powers.

With decisive leaders at the helm - President Vladimir Putin in Russia, President Xi Jinping in China and President Donald Trump in the US - it is plausible that the interplay could get accelerated. The shape of the interplay is unpredictable at present. The role of the Central Asian Republics (CAR) and Afghanistan would equally be important. The leaders would be governed by local rules, their regional aspirations, perception of national interest and security, which may impact the interplay. It is not just major powers, but regional actors will also shape the geopolitics of the region. India has deep and abiding interests in the CAR and Afghanistan. Central Asia is part of its extended strategic neighbourhood. India will have to find space for itself and play a role in accordance with its aspirations of emerging a leading power in Asia.

## **Major Powers in Central Asia and Afghanistan**

### ***Russian Interests***

A predominant interest of Russia in Eurasia is geopolitics, a theme that is recurrent throughout its history, especially since the conquest of Central Asia in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. An equally important aspect of its geopolitical interest has been a continuous debate within the country whether Russia's destiny lay with the West or with the East? Scholars and thinkers were identified as 'Westerners' or 'Eurasianists'. After the break up they were identified as 'Atlancists' or 'Eurasianists'. Both the West and the East hold tremendous significance for Russia given its enormous landmass. Except for the Ural Mountains, which are north-south, the vast swathe of Eurasian landmass stretching from Europe until it reaches the Pacific Ocean is without any natural hindrances. It is no wonder that a two headed eagle is Russia's emblem, looking in the Western as well as Eastern direction. Besides its wide ranging geopolitical significance, Russia also has deep historical, strategic, economic and cultural interests in the Eurasian region, particularly in Central Asia. Similarly, Afghanistan also holds immense significance in Russian strategic thinking because of its geopolitical proximity to Central Asia.

### *Russia as a Great Power*

Historically speaking, Tsarist Russia emerged as a continental power after the conquest of Central Asia. Subsequently, its rulers began to nurture the ambition of acquiring a warm water port on the Indian Ocean through Afghanistan. Tsarist Russia's imperial ambition was to emerge as a great seafaring empire like the Great Britain. On the other hand, the British rulers in the Indian Sub-continent were monitoring Russian moves in Central Asia. They feared for their empire and believed that Tsarist rulers would expand further and advance into the Indian Sub-continent in search of a warm water port. At that time, a strong possibility of a clash between the two empires for territorial and imperial domination in the Afghan region was being discussed. This conflict is often referred to as the 'Great Game' of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. These apprehensions were laid to rest by an agreement of 1907 which accepted the independence of Afghanistan and redrew its borders in such a way that the two empires did not share a common boundary. The Durand Line was created in the eastern part and Afghanistan emerged as a buffer between the empires as well as between the rest of the regions.

After the emergence of the Soviet Union, the CAR were firmly anchored in the Union. The Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 once again highlighted the geopolitical significance of Central Asia and Afghanistan. A view prevailing in certain quarters was that this was an attempt to fulfill its age old ambition to acquire a warm water port. This, however, is a moot point.

The break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 fundamentally altered the geopolitical map of Eurasia. 15 new independent entities emerged on the huge Eurasian landmass. In the early years of independence a section of Russian elite and the strategic community believed that the break-up provided a good opportunity to get rid of the historical baggage – especially that of Central Asia and the Caucasus – that was a financial drain on the erstwhile Soviet Union. However, sooner rather than later it was realised that Russia's southern flank, protected at a great cost, had disappeared. Regional conflicts broke out fuelled by non-traditional trends such as religious extremism and extreme nationalism. Central Asia was,

henceforth, exposed to these external forces. Its vulnerability was perceived with heightened concern as strong impulses of religious extremism began to make inroads from Afghanistan. These were indeed powerful forces, who had defeated the mighty Soviet army and had the potential to endanger the stability and territorial integrity of fragile Central Asia. In turn any destabilisation of Central Asia could have disastrous repercussions for the Russian regions adjoining Central Asia. Former Deputy Foreign Minister Georgy Kunadze expressed this concern when he said, “Russia has specific geopolitical interest in Central Asia that is to prevent the explosive change of Islamic extremism from penetrating into the country”<sup>1</sup>.

In the early Post-Cold War phase, there was an expectation among the leadership that with the end of the bipolar world order, Russia would be accepted as a natural and an equal partner by the West. Hard realities, however, compelled Russia to rethink this approach. An opinion began to gather momentum in the West that the notion that Russia would share the same values as America and cease to be a threat was rejected by many as unrealistic. It was from this thinking that Russia perceived that the US and its Allies were trying to create a uni-polar world order. As a counter to this thinking V. Kolosov and N. Mironenko in their book *Geopolitics and Political Geography* contended that Russia must develop a strategy that would encourage voluntary economic, cultural and communication integration<sup>2</sup>. Aleksandr Dugin, a political geographer noted, “Russia is a continental power engaged in a struggle for Eurasia, which is held to be its natural sphere of influence”<sup>3</sup>. Similarly Andranik Migranyan, one of President Yeltsin’s advisors on foreign policy, put it “... A significant proportion of the political establishment ... began to realize more and more clearly that a special role in the post-Soviet space belonged to Russia”<sup>4</sup>. There was a growing perception in Russia that the West had always wanted a weak Russia. Former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov succinctly expressed this sentiment when he said, “Considering Russia’s history, intellectual resources, huge size, natural resources and finally the level of development of its Armed Forces this country will not agree to the status of a state that is ‘led’. It will seek to establish itself as an independent center of a multi-polar world”<sup>5</sup>.

NATO's decision to expand in an eastward direction came as a big blow to Russia. A unanimous view in Russia both at the official and non-official level was that this expansion was not necessary. The possibility of NATO expanding in the post-Soviet space was viewed with immense trepidation. NATO had already expanded to safe limits and any further expansion was unwarranted. It may be mentioned that Georgia and Ukraine had shown keenness to join NATO. Russia feared that the expansion would lead to a uni-polar order which would not be able to maintain equilibrium of power. On this issue Russia and China shared the same views. As a consequence during the Chinese President Jiang Zemin's visit to Russia in April 1997, the two countries propounded the idea of a multi-polar world as opposed to the existing uni-polar world in which the US was the leading power. A multi-polar world, according to that idea, would be a stable one based on international law and upholding the centrality of the United Nations (UN).

With the aim of establishing itself as a 'pole' or a center in a multi-polar world, President Putin accorded a high priority to Central Asia and was determined to restore its lost influence in Central Asia. Henceforth President Putin's policy was driven by one single comprehensible goal – to rebuild “Greater Russia” by other than violent means to establish Russian control over geographical areas where it was originally established by the Tsarist Empire<sup>6</sup>. In 2008 Russian policy took a decisive decision to militarily intervene in Georgia leading to its break-up. Two Georgian regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia proclaimed independence from Georgia. Incidentally only eight countries including Russia have recognised their independence, but none from Central Asia or other post-Soviet countries have. There has been speculation in the media that the unrest in Kyrgyzstan (2010) was triggered because the then President Kurmanbek Bakiyev failed to evict the US from the Manas air base. A senior Russian official pompously said, “In Kyrgyzstan there should be only one base – Russian”. The Eurasian context of Russian Foreign policy had acquired a critical priority. Some analysts believe that the Eurasian dimension assumed significance because Russia was unable to achieve strategic understanding with the US and its allies. However, Alexander Lukin, a well-known Russian scholar opines that the turn to Eurasia or “pivot

to Asia” was a response not to a worsening of relations with the West but to two purely objective challenges - the need to establish relations with a region that is gradually becoming the center of world economies and politics, and to Russia’s strategic goal of developing its Siberian and Far Eastern region<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, China was increasing its footprints in Central Asia and Siberia in the Far East. Chinese migration to the Far East was a matter of concern to Russia. Another notable step of Russian policy was its decision to militarily intervene in Ukraine in 2014. The Crimean Peninsula was separated and incorporated into the Russian Federation. Russia feared that Ukraine was on the verge of joining NATO and it was not going to allow the NATO to cross that Red Line. Even today eastern Ukraine is in turmoil and Russian forces are concentrated on the common boundary line.

Subsequently, Russia’s military strikes in Syria on support of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad gave a decisive turn to international politics thus bringing Russia into global prominence. It signified that Russia had a role to play in global affairs. In the process its scope of strategic understanding with the West began to diminish. Today in Russia’s National Security Strategy, enunciated in December 2015, NATO is its principal adversary. At this point it is not clear whether President Trump would be able to reset America’s ties with Russia. Nevertheless Russia nurtures the ambition of a global power status and that is one of President Putin’s cherished goals. Besides, Russia also has other core interests in Central Asia.

### ***Security Interests***

One of Russia’s core interest is to safeguard its sovereignty and integrity from the growing danger of non-traditional threats which are present in large measure in the region. Among the non-traditional threats, the danger arises from religious extremism, terrorism, drug trafficking, smuggling of weapons and criminal cartels operating in northern Afghanistan. Russian security interests, as mentioned earlier, lie in a stable and a secure Central Asia, whereas the non-traditional threats are powerful in nature and have the capability to destabilise the Central Asian region. With the rise of the Taliban, Afghanistan under its

rule emerged as an epicenter of fundamentalism, thus posing a major challenge for the CAR. The concern in particular was the Fergana Valley - the “Heart of Central Asia” -which had always been a stronghold of Islam and a bastion of conservatism and orthodoxy and where suppressed cultural and extremist forces had already established presence. Any debilitation of the Fergana Valley by such forces with support from across the border would have a ripple effect on the whole of Central Asia whose outcome could be disastrous for the region.

After Operation Enduring Freedom was launched by the NATO in October 2001, Russia and the CAR welcomed the defeat of the Taliban regime. Russia cooperated and supported the CARs in granting the coalition forces the military bases. Subsequently, two air bases were set up by the coalition forces led by the US, in Karshi (Uzbekistan) and Manas (Kyrgyzstan) in 2001, which were closed down in 2005 and 2010 respectively. Although the coalition forces did not withdraw after the defeat of the Taliban, despite disquiet in certain sections Russia along with the CAR extended logistical supplies route; the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) in 2011, which has proved to be a beneficial alternative. Over thirteen years of ‘war on terror’ insurgency has not been destroyed, neither has the terrorist infrastructure even dismantled. The withdrawal of the bulk of the coalition forces by the end of 2014, except a residual force has led to a new geopolitical situation; a weak Afghan government, a resurgent Taliban and a Central Asia that still depends on Russia to provide security. An additional factor that has complicated the regional security scenario is the growing presence of the Islamic State (IS) or *Daesh* (in Arabic) in Afghanistan. A worrisome factor from the Russian perspective is that the presence of IS in Afghanistan has boosted the morale of the extremist groups in the Fergana Valley. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is active and is perceived by the CAR as a principal threat. The IMU reportedly is now an affiliate of the IS. The threat of religious extremism and terrorism is rising, given the series of blasts being carried out by these forces in Afghanistan.

Intertwined with extremist activities is the growing danger of drug trafficking and smuggling of weapons, which has kept insurgency alive. Besides drugs have had a negative impact on Russia. Every year several thousand deaths occur

because of its consumption. It has also affected the CAR where economic conditions are poor and hence the unemployed youth become carriers of this contraband. Central Asia is one the routes for drug traffickers and in the process criminal gangs have sprung up who oversee the safe passage of the drugs. These gangs are also involved in smuggling of weapons and hence Central Asia is considered as one of the weaponised regions in the world. Emergence of Central Asia as a weaponised region began with the retreat of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989. On their way back, a lot of arms and ammunitions were left behind. Similarly the US also began to withdraw its military hardware, but did not disarm the heavily armed Mujahideen, who then turned their attention to the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. After the rise of the Taliban, there was formation of the Northern Alliance comprising of Russia, Tajikistan, Iran and India. Subsequently the Northern Alliance was armed to fight the Southern Alliance and was supplied arms by Russia and Uzbekistan. The beginning of the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1997) saw an influx of arms to both the opposing factions. The appearance of drug cartels and organised crime in northern Afghanistan along the border with Tajikistan to oversee the safe passage of narcotics and smuggling of weapons to extremist groups in the Fergana Valley particularly to the IMU added to the region being flushed with arms. That is perhaps the reason why insurgency is resurgent. An additional source for the production, sale and proliferation of weaponry is Darra Adam Khelin North West Frontier Province commonly known as the 'Main Open Bazaar'. Arms production in Darra was regarded as a cottage industry, but has gradually become a large industry, free of government control and taxation. As long as production of opium in Afghanistan continues, weapons will flow in the region. The withdrawal of bulk of coalition forces has given a further impetus to these dangerous activities.

On Afghanistan, Russia's emphasis has been on the stability of the country. The danger of the country once again sliding into a hub of extremism and terrorism is a horrendous prospect for Russia. It apprehends the return of Central Asian and Caucasian recruits from the Middle East, who on their return could create turmoil in the country. However, Russia's willingness to play an active role



in Afghanistan reflects its ambition to be counted as a power of consequence especially in a region that is of critical importance to it. Another factor that is impinging on Russia's strategic thinking is the steady in roads of China in Afghanistan and its increasing involvement in its mining sector as well as in connectivity projects through Central Asia. Is China enhancing its strategic footprints in Central Asia at the expense of Russia? Is this the beginning of a new Great Game as many believe or merely pursuit of Chinese national interests?

### ***Economic Interests***

Russia's immediate concern after the break-up was to ensure that its own industrial production did not come to a halt. The components and accessories of Russia's defence industries were manufactured all over the post-Soviet space. It was essential to re-establish coordination with those industries. Secondly the raw material requirements of Russian industries generally came from this region. Central Asia was the chief provider of cotton for Russian textile industries. It was during the Presidency of Putin that the Eurasian dimension of its policy was energized considerably – the “Pivot to Asia”. It is a well-known fact that Russia is the largest storehouse of gas. President Putin has skillfully used the energy factor to emerge as a significant player in global politics. Apart from its phenomenal energy resources, Russia is home to rare minerals and other raw material. Another advantage that Russia enjoys is in the transport sector. The CAR is landlocked and hence dependent on Russia for communicating with the outside world. A prestigious project in the transport sector has been the ‘International North South Transport Corridor’ (INSTC) connecting Mumbai with St. Petersburg. In 2000 India, Iran and Russia agreed to the multi-modal transport corridor, a combination of sea, rail and surface transport. Later Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan have also joined the project. The INSTC is operational, but has not been functioning smoothly due to lack of coordination and bureaucratic delays. However, recent re-focus on the INSTC from the Russian side indicates that it would like to build up partnership relations with India and countries along the route, especially Iran.

### *Russian Policy*

In the early years Russian policy towards the post-Soviet space, which it refers to as its “near abroad”, was through the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Initially it was not easy for Russia to accept that the CAR was now under sovereign entities. Its policy had to be reworked; importantly it had to give up its big brotherly attitude. It appears that Russia has not been able to shed this attitude. The focus of Russian policy has been re-integration of the post space.

Viewed from the bilateral perspective, Russia has close ties with some of the CAR, nations while it is ‘correct’ with some others. For geopolitical reason Kazakhstan is perhaps the closest maintaining consistently friendly relations, as the two countries share one of the world’s longest land border (Approximately 6,770 km). Besides the commonality of interests in the security sphere, defence cooperation is substantial; the Baikanour space launching centre and defence related industries are located here. Due to their economic dependence on Russia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan host most of Russian military presence. Russian-Uzbek relations follow a zigzag pattern, though so far Uzbekistan has not revoked its Strategic Partnership Agreement with Russia (2006). Ties with Turkmenistan at best are minimal due to its status as a neutral state. At the political level what has drawn the four Central Asian States to Russia is the fear of “color revolution” and regime change, supported by the West (Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan March 2005 and Andijan incident in Uzbekistan May 2005). Russia has fully backed the existing regimes and their strong control of the government and State apparatus. A shortcoming of Russian policy in the economic field is its inability to provide massive funds for investment to the CAR in their transformation process.

By the turn of the century Russia began to emphasise a multilateral approach. Two of its flagship projects - the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) - are regional in nature and aimed at bringing about integration in the post-Soviet space. In 1992 Russia formed the Collective Security Treaty (CST) so as to protect the external borders of the

Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Later the CST was converted into the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2003, so as to have better coordination with its members (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) and importantly to integrate the defence systems. A Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) was set up under the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Framework to collect information, share experiences and coordinate activities. A Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF) was created in order to deal with emergencies on the external border. In the process Russia has high military presence in the region including two military bases at Kant in Kyrgyzstan and Dushanbe in Tajikistan. Periodic reports suggest that Russia is negotiating a third base at Osh, the Kyrgyz part of the Fergana Valley. Despite its high level military presence under the CSTO, the instrument has not evolved into a compact and an effective security tool. This is partly because Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are not its members, and partly because the borders in the Fergana Valley are not settled which makes it easy for insurgents to cross the border, enter and escape with impunity. Besides lack of uniformity of rules and regulation, need for better border control and management are other factors hampering a smooth functioning of the CSTO. According to President Putin's vision, the EEU is intended to be a link between Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. The CAR nations have their own military formation at present, however, it is not able to tackle the transnational threats, hence the dependence on Russia. Another point to be noted is that the source of their arms supplies is Russia and it may not be easy to procure arms from any other source. What has added importance to CSTO is an agreement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which acknowledged its leading role as the security provider for the region.

In order to deal with the complex geopolitical scenario in the post US withdrawal phase, Russia, China, Pakistan and the Taliban initiated talks with the aim of bringing peace to Afghanistan. It is indeed a preposterous proposition especially for Russia who so far had no interaction with the Taliban, in fact, have been opposing them by violent means. To think that the Taliban could emerge as a counter to the Islamic State (IS) is a flawed expectation. In fact many observers believe that the line separating the IS and the Taliban is thin. Ideologically

Russia and Taliban are poles apart. Nevertheless an expanded meeting which included India, Iran and the CAR nations was held recently in Moscow (14-15 April 2017). The US was also invited but it refused to attend on the plea that the goal of such meeting is unclear. Media reports suggest that the outcome of these meetings is negligible, except that it has given legitimacy to the Taliban. Its noteworthy that earlier Russia did not consider Central Asia and Afghanistan belonging to the same geopolitical region, but now it accepts this proposition. In an overall assessment of the Afghan situation, there is a widespread view that a resurgence of religious extremism and terrorism would keep the simmering insurgency alive.

Russia's multilateral initiatives at the economic level are probably more effective, than the CSTO. Anchored on the Customs Union, the EEU comprising Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is moving towards the gradual lifting of custom duties, border controls and restrictions on visits and employment opportunities for all participants, at the same time tightening control on the Eurasian Union's common borders<sup>8</sup>. A milestone event was the International Economic Forum in St. Petersburg (16-17 June 2017) where President Putin proposed a new vision of economic cooperation in Eurasia a "great Eurasian partnership" which he also referred to as "Greater Eurasia"<sup>9</sup>. Whether the new concept involves any understanding between Russia and China on increased cooperation in Central Asia is not clear. It is plausible in the near future as the contours of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) become clear, the level of cooperation could become evident. At present a major challenge for the EEU is institutional in nature. It was around this time that China launched its mega connectivity project, the SREB. For the Russian and Chinese initiatives, Central Asia occupies a central position; both espouse nearly similar objectives, but the issue is, can both the projects work amicably? It would not be wrong to state that these projects have inherent geopolitical aims to build leverages and influence. The sticky issue is the issue of Free Trade Area (FTA). Russia and China have agreed to cooperate with each other and align their respective projects (May 2015). Does the alignment of projects imply automatic granting of a FTA? At present prospects for a FTA agreement with China appear distant. The EEU has still a long way to go before it could

emerge as a strong regional grouping on the model of the Council of Europe. At this point the EEU could promote better strategic understanding among its members as well as with China. Russia and China would like to keep alive the “Shanghai Spirit” of 1996.

Despite its advantages of language, historical and cultural contacts, and providing transit facilities to the CAR, Russian policy has not had the desired result. It did not pay adequate attention to the sensitivities of the Central Asian leaders. President Islam Karimov rightly stated, “Uzbekistan needs democratic Russia which accepts us in an equal and all round way, which welcomes our success and is ready to hold out its hand and help us, thus finding support, strength, help and advantage for itself. This is the kind of Russia we consider close to us”<sup>10</sup>. On the other hand, Russian approach is rooted in geopolitics. In its mindset Central Asia is still considered as part of the empire/Union. Russian policy is hampered by its geopolitical approach to Central Asia. According to an analyst, “Rather than trying to maximise and balance relations with the Central Asian States, Russia is now aggressively entering into a classical client State relationship with Kyrgyzstan and to a lesser extent Tajikistan”<sup>11</sup>. Russian policy towards Afghanistan became proactive after the withdrawal of coalition forces in 2014. It has opted for a cooperative approach with China, Pakistan, the CAR, India and Iran. As mentioned the outcome of its meetings is minimal.

At the wider level Russia has initiated a forum Brazil-Russia-India-China and South Africa (BRICS). The aim of the BRICS is reform of the global financial system, strengthening the central role of the UN Security Council (UNSC) in the international system and utilising the complementary nature of the members’ economies in order to accelerate economic development<sup>12</sup>. In Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 regional groupings figure prominently. Among the two such groupings priority is accorded to the BRICS.

In the early years Russian policy towards Afghanistan was defensive. Its concern was protecting the borders of Central Asia with Afghanistan particularly of those who are members of the CSTO. Although the withdrawal of coalition

forces from Afghanistan has been welcomed, a view prevailing among a section of the Russian elite is, “The retention of a limited US military contingent and continued US support for the Afghan government would therefore help avoid instability and facilitate a softer resolution to the question of the country’s future regime”<sup>13</sup>. Russia, however, as mentioned, has initiated a proactive diplomacy by joining the recent quadrilateral initiative on Afghanistan.

### ***Chinese Interests***

Flanking its Western periphery China has developed immense stakes in Central Asia. Its interests are primarily driven by geopolitics, energy security and infrastructure projects and aspiration for a great power status in Asia.

### ***Geopolitical and Security Concerns***

In the wake of the Central Asian States gaining sudden independence, a new geopolitical situation had arisen on China’s Western periphery. Chinese concerns for the security of its Western Xinjiang region were serious. These concerns originated from the long standing ethnic discord; the *Uyghurs* who are in majority in Xinjiang, are not Han Chinese, but of Turkic stock and followers of Islam. The Uyghurs have been struggling for autonomy and at times have even demanded complete independence. Two major liberation movements, the East Turkestan Liberation Movement (ETLM) and East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), are active and enjoy considerable sympathy and support both within and outside the country. A sizeable minority of Uyghurs also reside in the CAR adjoining China’s Western periphery. A Chinese analyst opined, “If Central Asia provides a base for the East Turkestan militants it will be extremely difficult for China to contain the movement. On the other hand, if Central Asia serves as the barrage between “East Turkestan” and the external world which will significantly help China to strife the movement.” That is the crux of China’s anti-terrorism interest in Central Asia<sup>14</sup>.

In Chinese strategic thinking utmost importance is given to the periphery, perhaps due to the fact that China is a huge land mass and shares land borders with several countries. As a consequence peripheral security is of utmost

importance and has two dimensions, one is to maintain stability within its own territory adjoining the boundary, and the second aspect is to ensure peace and stability on the border by promoting a belt of good neighbourliness, peace and friendship. In short it is to initially build relations of friendship and cordiality and subsequently to increase its leverage preferably by economic means. The aim is to ensure that negative tendencies do not gain an upper hand in the region with the support of neighbouring countries. One of China's goal is primarily economic development of its own regions. For that, it needs peace and stability along the periphery. Chinese concerns for the Uyghurs often labeled as separatists exacerbated further with the rise of religious 'extremism, terrorism and separatism' – the three evils in the Chinese lexicon. Consequently the geopolitical significance of Central Asia increased manifold, for the Uyghur militants were being trained in Afghanistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. The militants were using the Central Asia route to reach the FATA and comeback to Xinjiang.

The Uyghur militancy has escalated after NATO's decision of 2010 to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan by 2014. The Uyghur militancy had gained a lot of confidence possibly after receiving training in the FATA. Earlier it was reported that the Uyghurs were using knife attacks, but they are now using arms and ammunitions and capturing towns instead of blasts. In Chinese perception Kyrgyzstan is the main centre of ETLM, which is affiliated to the Al Qaeda. Increasing presence of the IS in Afghanistan and Central Asia has impacted the Uyghurs.

The spread of extremism from Afghanistan to Central Asia could not but be a matter of concern to China, which is already facing Uyghur insurgency in Xinjiang province. It also highlights the geopolitical significance of Afghanistan as China itself shares a short border with Afghanistan. Besides China's ambitious plans for infrastructure development and economic activities in the Central Asian region could go awry, as there is also the danger of the well-entrenched Uyghur militants in the borderlands between Afghanistan and Pakistan to utilise the same infrastructure developmental plans for their own goals. An additional worrisome factor from the Chinese perspective is that, the region does not have a credible security architecture, which could effectively address

the problem of religious extremism, terrorism, drug trafficking, smuggling of weapons among other issues and control the rise of militancy.

A related concern with the Uyghur militancy is the fear of color revolutions spreading into Xinjiang. The violent incidents in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 2005 posed a serious concern to China. The Uyghur cause could also receive American support. In the view of Dr. Chen Xinangyang, “The color revolutions engineered by the US single-handedly not only violated the sovereignty and threatened the legitimate governments of Central Asian countries, but also created conditions for local terrorist organizations and religious extremist forces to ‘fish in troubled waters’ and seize opportunities to grow the strength”<sup>15</sup>.

Besides China believed that the Western military presence in Central Asia, especially the Manas air base in Kyrgyzstan, was an attempt to encircle its Western periphery, for Manas is a mere 200 km from the Chinese border. Though the US has vacated the Manas air base, it nevertheless has five military bases in Afghanistan, forces upto 10,000 and this figure is to be increased according to the recent pronouncements made by the Trump Administration. China would like to increase its presence in Central Asia so as to monitor the moves of the NATO forces, and the US implementation of the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with Afghanistan. On the other hand, China sees a strategic opportunity in the post withdrawal phase to increase its presence and build strategic leverage in Central Asia and Afghanistan. The US interests are strategic in nature, but it is not their core interest. Russia’s downturn in its relations with the West after the incorporation of Crimean peninsula and the Trump Administration is showing no signs of a reset in the US – Russian ties. Economic slow-down and Russian need for Chinese support against the backdrop of evolving global politics are opportune factors that augur well for China’s enhanced engagement with the CAR and Afghanistan.

### ***Energy Security and Construction of Infrastructure Projects***

Along with its growing security interests, economic considerations also began to figure prominently in Chinese strategic interests. By the turn of the century



China's dependence on imports of energy resources began to rise. Its impressive economic growth required a sustainable and predictable source of supply of raw materials including energy resources. Among the CAR, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are richly endowed with energy- oil and natural gas. Reportedly their respective sectors of the Caspian Sea are equally well endowed with energy. In 1998, Kazakhstan's energy reserves were estimated at a whopping figure estimated at 85 billion barrels. New discoveries could push this figure even higher. Kazakhstan has been exporting its oil through Russia; the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) carries oil and its natural gas is transported via the Baltic Pipeline System to Europe. Kazakhstan would not like to depend on one source to transport its energy. Coinciding with China's demand for energy, Kazakhstan signed its major export pipeline deal with it. This pipeline came on stream in 2009 and carries oil from Aktau on the Caspian Sea traversing a distance of 1400 miles to reach Alashankou on the Chinese border. The second pipeline would carry oil from the giant Kashagan oil field, also known as the "elephant" for it is the biggest in Asia. Alongwith Turkmenistan, the Central Asia Gas pipeline has come on stream and reaches Khogros in China via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Reportedly the second gas pipeline is in the planning stage. Besides, China has also been investing in the energy sector; the purchase of Petro Kazakhstan by the China National Petroleum Corporation and upgradation of the existing refineries are cases in point. Energy linkages with China have helped the two Central Asian states to diversify their routes; they are also trying to diversify their markets particularly in the southern direction.

Apart from ensuring its energy needs infrastructure development is an area on which China is focusing its prime policy. Probably China sees a logic in Mackinder's thesis of the centrality of Eurasian Heartlands and the Pivot of history and its relevance even today. There are already twelve border crossings between China and Kazakhstan. China's focus on infrastructure development has two aspects; domestic and the need for regional connectivity. From the perspective of domestic development Peter Frankopan, a Senior Research Fellow at Worcester College, Oxford, and Director at the Center for Byzantine Research at Oxford University says, "the Chinese government is building

networks carefully and deliberately to connect to minerals, energy sources and access to cities, harbours and oceans”<sup>16</sup>. Khorgos, a border town on Chinese-Kazakh border has emerged a hub for transport corridor to the West. Known as the Eastern Gate, it has Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and a dry port. At the broader level Chinese economic interests widened considerably, seeking a way to deal with serious over capacity in the steel, and manufacturing sectors. President Xi Jinping announced the SREB during a visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013. It was a revival of the ancient silk route, while main motivation at that time was surplus grain and gold.

During the visit to Kazakhstan President Jinping unveiled his ‘Chinese Dreams’ when he put forward the idea of the SREB reviving the traditional Silk Route aimed at connectivity with Europe via Central Asia to increase trade between the Asia-Pacific region and Europe. The mega project is expected to bring economic prosperity, development and political stability to Xinjiang as well assist developmental processes of Central Asia. It must be mentioned that unlike the SCO, the SREB is wholly a Chinese initiative and not a multilateral effort, which should have been the case since it is expected to traverse through several countries. The ineffectiveness of the SCO and its tardy implementation of economic projects could have prompted China to take an independent initiative. Such an approach coincides with its growing assertiveness in foreign policy. China has created a ‘Silk Road Fund’ of USD 46 billion for the specific purpose of promoting this objective. The progress of the SREB would however, depend on the terms and conditions and the framework agreement that China would put on the Table for consideration of the countries involved. At present the details of the project are not clear. Nevertheless the project has taken on huge significance as a way of defining China’s place in the world order and its relations<sup>17</sup>.

For China infrastructure development in Central Asia has acquired an added urgency because of its deepening economic involvement and the mining sector in Afghanistan. It requires sustainable and reliable transport corridor for transshipment of the cargo. At the political level China’s engagement with the Taliban has not had the desired result.

### Aspiration for a Great Power Status

Ever since the upward trajectory of its steady economic growth, it has fuelled Chinese ambitions to attain a global power status. Views ranging from extreme nationalism verging on jingoism to a sober assessment of the country's capability and strength are appearing regularly in the media and journals. In the opinion of former Russian Ambassador Vitaly Vorobyov, "In 2013 China's foreign policy positioning acquired new traits and a new style. In political terms China increasingly views its geopolitical status as the world's second largest economy after the United States. Chinese foreign policy is becoming more proactive and aggressive both in words and deeds"<sup>18</sup>. The surge of a new assertiveness is reflected amply in the writings from the security establishment. To cite an example in a highly popular book by a People's Liberation Army (PLA) National Defense University Professor Senior Colonel Liu Mingfu, *The China Dream*, published in 2010, he wrote, "China must strive to have the most powerful military in the world. If it does not achieve this dream, then the efforts of the United States will relegate China to the sidelines of the international arena"<sup>19</sup>. On the other hand a sober assessment was put forward by former deputy chief of PLA's General Staff, General Xiong Guankai who expressed his concurrence with the Minister of Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi that China must become merely one of the poles in a multi-polar world.

While the debate will continue, China has launched its mega flagship project the SREB and the Maritime Silk Route of the Twenty first century (MSR) in 2013 as a step in achieving its global aspirations. It is at present guided by the dictum "... Stabilize in the East – strengthen your positions in the North – come down in the South – move forward in the West"<sup>20</sup>. A draft anti-terrorism law for the first time would legalise the posting of Chinese soldiers on foreign soil with the consent of the host nation is on the anvil. On 14 and 15 May 2017 China organized a mega event; the Belt and Road Forum (BRF) which was attended by 29 world leaders and over 50 high level delegations participated in this spectacular event. It amply demonstrates China's Dream of attaining a global power status. Today the prime focus of China's policy is on

the SREB an integral component of acquiring such a status. Incidentally India did not participate in this event.

### *Chinese Policy*

Over a decade and a half Chinese interests have grown from a regional focus to a global orientation. With the initiation of its ambitious project the SREB its strategic interest in Central Asia have also increased tremendously. Additionally China's growing economic interests in Afghanistan has further added to its interests. Hence the aim of its policy in the CARs and Afghanistan, its strategic rear, is stability and security of the region. In its conception, stability can be ensured by economic development, ensuring regional security either by bilateral or a multilateral approach and prevention of Central Asia from emerging as an arena for major power competition. In pursuit of its objectives, China's policy focuses on a multilateral approach, as it wished to work in partnership with Russia. However, gradually the bilateral content is also becoming strong.

China's initial multilateral approach was rooted in Central Asia. It did not wish to tread on Russian sensitivities, hence its preferred instrument was the SCO of which Russia is also a member along with the four Central Asian countries. Adil Kaukenov, a Kazakh scholar rightly observed, "The SCO allows China to exert influence in Central Asia mainly in non-traditional security issues avoiding concern from the Central Asian Republics and Russia .... From the perspective of great power competition the SCO is also an instrument employed by China to expel the US from the region and reach parity with Russia"<sup>21</sup>. However, as mentioned the SCO did not evolve as an effective multilateral grouping.

As the trend towards globalisation began to gather momentum, a paradoxical trend was becoming apparent. The trend towards regionalism was also acquiring importance, as China considers Central Asia as an important component of its regional policy. It would like to create interdependencies between itself and the CAR in terms of energy pipelines and transport corridors. In the process build up its strategic leverages and create interdependencies, an area of its influence, which would enable it to play a role in global issues. In this

context the SREB and MSR are mega projects having global ramifications. Tingyi Wang, a Chinese scholar of the Tsinghua University, explained that the Chinese interests are driven by the vision of a “greater Eurasian idea” that calls for strengthening economic and cultural integration across the whole swathe of territory ...”<sup>22</sup>. Interestingly, as discussed earlier, both Russia and China are promoting the idea of greater Eurasia with each one as its centre /pole in a multi-polar world.

At this juncture the details of the SREB are not known. The initiative is not consultative in nature, as mentioned, and is an independent construct of China. Meanwhile China has created a Silk Road Fund, but again the mechanism for drawing finance is vague. An important initiative launched in this regard is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The AIIB was formed in January 2016 and its main aim is to lend money together with other International Financial Institutions for primarily connectivity projects all over the world. At this point 56 countries are its members and are willing to work with the Bank. As observed by Jin Liqun, the first President of the Bank, “Now that China has developed it is our turn to contribute .... China needs to do something that can help it to be recognized as a responsible leader”. In reality AIIB is intertwined with the SREB and is likely to promote China’s geopolitical interests. In 2016 it approved USD 27.5 million loan for the Dushanbe-Uzbekistan Border Road Improvement Project in Tajikistan, and USD 100 million loan for the Shorkot-Khanewal section of National Motorway M-4 in Pakistan. The AIIB had targeted to disburse loans up to USD 1.6 billion, but extended over 1.7 billion loans to various infrastructure projects. Since the AIIB is a year old, a great deal will depend on its acceptance by other countries especially the developed countries. The AIIB policies and management are other factors that will determine its effectiveness.

Unlike in the past, China is giving a major thrust to its ties with the CAR. In this regard ties with Kazakhstan are the key to China’s success in its mega SREB project and have developed in an upward trajectory. China is one of Kazakhstan’s four major trade partners. In 2016 trade turnover between the two countries constituted 16 percent of Kazakhstan’s total foreign

trade. Over the past two years agreements signed were on the creation of cluster areas in the field of transport infrastructure, trade, manufacturing, construction, agriculture among others. In Uzbekistan the most prestigious project undertaken by China is the 19.2 km railway tunnel connecting the Fergana Valley with the rest of the country. The tunnel was built at a cost of USD 455 million. In Tajikistan it has completed a road link through the Kulma pass connecting Kashgar with north eastern Afghanistan known as 'little Badkhsan'. In Afghanistan it has invested over USD 2 billion in the Aynak copper mines and is prospecting for oil in the Amu Darya basin. At the political level China has Strategic Partnership Agreements with Afghanistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Defence cooperation between China and the CAR is modest. The cooperation includes joint exercises with individual countries as well as collectively through the SCO.

The geopolitical significance of Central Asia has increased immensely in the present decade on account of securing energy and as a transit territory to reach out to Europe, the Middle East and Afghanistan.

## **American Interests**

### ***Geopolitical Importance***

The end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 was viewed as a victory of the Western system. The US was the sole leading global power and no country at that time could challenge its supremacy. Immediately after the break up the US concern was to prevent an uncontrolled proliferation of weapons of Mass destruction and ensure the safety of nuclear arsenal that was located in the newly independent states of the post-Soviet space. In Central Asia, Kazakhstan was the only country where nuclear missiles were located. These war heads were subsequently removed and successfully dismantled. Except the nuclear issue, Central Asia was peripheral in American strategic interests. The geopolitical significance of Central Asia came into focus when Russia enunciated its Military Doctrine in 1993 proclaiming the post-Soviet space or its "near abroad" as its zone of special interest. The Military

Doctrine highlighted the threat of local and regional conflicts faced by Russia on its Southern periphery, for instance the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in South Caucasus, the Tajik Civil War (1992-97) in Central Asia etc. Hence, Russia propounded the idea of creating a belt of security, stability and good neighbourliness around its periphery. These pronouncements were perceived in the West as Russia's aspiration to regain its great power status by claiming that the post-Soviet space was its sphere of special interest. In their view an unstable Russia aspiring for a special zone of interest was itself a source of instability. Henry Kissinger an influential opinion maker and former US Secretary of State said, "Russia is a great power and has expanded for 400 years .... Our problem is to encourage Russia to stay within its borders"<sup>23</sup>. Former National Security Adviser Z. Brzezinski wrote in 1998, "Eurasia has been the center of world power. A power that dominates Eurasia would control two of the world's three most advanced and economically productive regions ... rendering the Western hemisphere and Oceania geopolitically peripheral to the world's central continent". As a counter to Russian claims of a special zone of interest on its periphery, Brzezinski put forth the idea of "geopolitical pluralism and multiculturalism". It implied that the US and its Allies also had vital interests at stake in the post-Soviet space. Russian approach should be inclusive and not exclusive. In his book *The Grand Chessboard* Brzezinski advocated and elaborated on this concept. His views subsequently became the cornerstone of both Presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush's policies towards the newly independent states of Eurasia.<sup>24</sup>

By the turn of the century, the US led NATO operations in Afghanistan highlighted the significance of the Central Asian region. In its counter terrorism operations the CARs rendered valuable assistance. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan offered military base facilities which proved helpful in supplies of logistics in the conduct of war. Kazakhstan offered the coalition forces rights to overfly its territory and re-fueling facilities. Even Turkmenistan allowed passage through its territory for non-lethal cargo. In 2011 Pakistan closed the access of the Khyber Pass to the coalition forces, but the CARs by associating with the NDN offered a significant alternative to the coalition forces for the transshipment of critical supplies. Now that the bulk of Western coalition

forces have withdrawn from Afghanistan the NDN will continue to perform its vital function of keeping open the supply route for the residual troops in Afghanistan.

Apart from its military presence, interconnected with the security interests is stability of the Central Asian region. The best guarantee for ensuring the stability is to build a democratic liberal polity and a market driven economy. Elaborating on this idea noted American analyst Stephen Blank wrote, "... this American policy of defending the independence, integrity and security of these states extends the long established vital geostrategic interests of the US in forestalling the rise of any Eurasian empire"<sup>25</sup>. In a speech at the Gumilev Eurasian University in Astana on 3 October 2005, former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated that the US is willing to help the countries extricate themselves from regional self-isolation by integrating into world affairs"<sup>26</sup>. The primary driver of American interest in Eurasia was to ensure that no challenge emerged from the region to its supremacy. Two Eurasian powers Russia and China had the potentialities to challenge the American position. As succinctly observed by the Director of Eurasia Programme of the Valdai Club Timofei Bordachev, "The United States whose forces are active in the immediate vicinity of Chinese and Russian borders, and in locations that have strategic importance for both the countries. To some extent this observation makes the US the third great power in the Central Asian Eurasian region"<sup>27</sup>.

### ***Security Considerations***

Ever since the devastating 9/11 attack on New York and Washington, fighting religious extremism and terrorism has become a core interest of the American policy. The 'War on Terror' dislodged the Taliban regime within a couple of weeks, but the coalition forces could not achieve their counter insurgency national strategy. The US was not able to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure and their safe havens in Pakistan. The non-traditional threats are still powerful and the Taliban in a resurgent mode. American interest lie in a stable, secure and a legitimate government in Afghanistan. These goals are similar to what Russia and China also want, but their approaches are diverse.



The presence of the IS in Afghanistan has added a new dimension to the American strategy. The recent decision to drop the massive 22,000 pound monster bomb was aimed at caves in eastern Nangarhar province where IS militants were holed up and later reportedly killed. The US decision could be attributed, as noted by the Director of Carnegie India Raja Mohan, "... about warning America's friends and adversaries in the region not to count the US out of the Afghan equation"<sup>28</sup>. Reports suggest that coalition troops will be going to Helmand for further action against the insurgents. In the security sphere the role of Western forces is pivotal. Russia and China may not want to get militarily involved in Afghanistan as they would not like a long drawn non-traditional war especially when they have Islamic radicals entrenched in their own countries. It would not be wrong to state that both Russia and China in reality may not want a complete withdrawal of coalition forces.

### ***Economic Interests***

There was no direct American interest involved in the CAR. However, when the issue of ensuring energy security came to occupy the centre stage of international politics, the US interest was for its European allies who were deficient in energy sources. Since Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan had abundant energy resources, the US keen to facilitate the European countries attempt to procure Central Asian energy. Central Asian reserves may not be comparable to that of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, nevertheless they do constitute a significant alternative. A defining feature of the Central Asian energy landscape is that the region is landlocked. Despite this daunting feature a virtual scramble ensued among the Western multinationals often supported by their respective governments to gain access to these reserves and possibly control them. It was clear that an efficient export pipeline infrastructure was essential for the energy sources to reach the markets. The issue of laying new export pipeline infrastructure assumed a new dimension— political rather than economic considerations.

### ***American Policy***

By the turn of the century the thrust of the American policy began to broaden. In the 1990s, the aim of its policy was to ensure that the nuclear war heads

stationed by the Soviet Union were dismantled and taken to a safe sight in Russia. In December 1993 Vice-President Al Gore and Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbaev signed a Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) agreement to dismantle and destroy the 104 SS-18 missiles and silos in Kazakhstan. Once the nuclear war heads were removed and dismantled, the US interest in Central Asia flagged. Uzbekistan's location in the centre of Central Asia became the main motivating factor in US's policy. In Frederick Starr's assessment Uzbekistan was uniquely positioned to anchor the security of the region. The idea of Uzbekistan as an anchor State found resonance in Brzezinski's thinking as well. In his view Uzbekistan was a strategically pivotal State<sup>29</sup>. In 1999 the US and Uzbekistan signed a CTR agreement to dismantle and decontaminate a biological weapon research facility and to provide alternative employment for its scientists. A new American legislation Silk Road Strategy Act of March 1999 laid the basis for US cooperation in the security sphere.

As the differing geopolitical perspectives began emerging the corner stone of American policy came to focus on liberal democratic polity. Such an approach would strengthen stability in an unstable region. In the perception of former Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, "the countries of Caucasus and Central Asia should be independent, prosperous and secure. This would widen the area of stability in a strategically vital region that borders China, Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan. We believe our presence and influence in the region can itself be a force for the right kind of integration"<sup>30</sup>. Moreover stability would guarantee the safety of American investments in the energy sector.

In pursuit of its objective, American policy's biggest initiative was the encouragement to its own as well as the European multinationals to launch the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) export pipeline that bypassed Russia. In Western view Russian monopoly over the energy exports had to be challenged in order to strengthen the independence of the CARs and the Caucasus.

American policy has, however, preferred a bilateral approach. At the economic level the US has extended assistance chiefly to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Nearly sixty per cent investments are in the extractive industries. Several

American multinationals are involved in prospecting, developing, production and transportation. One of the reasons why economic interaction is limited is because the necessary economic reforms have yet to take place, particularly in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The aim of American policy is to integrate these countries quickly into the world economy. Although promotion of democracy, rule of law and human rights is the chief objective of American policy, these principles have been soft pedaled in view of the strategic significance of Central Asia against the back drop of its deep interests in the region.

Motivation for a multilateral approach is on a low key, partly because Central Asian State structures are weak. In Neil MacFarlane's view, "weak State structures have difficulty in delivering on the commitments they make in regional cooperation"<sup>31</sup>. US interaction with Central Asia is a recent phenomenon and therefore it is not certain whether it would be accepted as a leader if any regional grouping emerges. By the time President Barrack Obama assumed the Presidency in the US (2009) it was clear that the 'War on Terror' was leading to nowhere, except being a heavy drain on American financial resources and the body bags. Hence in a milestone policy speech at West Point Military Academy in December 2009, President Obama announced the exit strategy from Afghanistan. Undoubtedly the withdrawal of NATO forces would create a new geopolitical situation, as the military presence had earlier. President Obama announced that troops would be withdrawn by 2012, but later the date was advanced to 2014. A residual force of around 15,000 troops would be left behind as part of Resolute Support Mission for training and guidance of Afghan forces. In March 2016 President Obama's Administration took the initiative to launch the 'Central Asia+1' format for closer cooperation with the CAR. The Foreign Ministers of all the five Central Asian States attended the Washington meet. On this occasion former Secretary of State John Kerry had mentioned earlier (October 2015) Central Asia+1 and promoted the idea of "New Silk Road" initiative to strengthen links through energy, trade, transit custom procedures and communication. At the same time Kerry also said, "Economic integration is not and should not be a zero sum game – to avoid a clash of big power interest". No further details are available on the follow up of

this initiative. Does it have a future? The American aim at present appears to be low key, its interest is to see 'No Single Power' that is Russia or China, gains an upper hand in Central Asia. Such an approach is also in congruence with the goal of the CAR.

### **Interplay of Major Powers and the Response of Central Asian Republics and Afghanistan**

Over more than two decades Eurasia has witnessed an interplay of both cooperative and competitive tendencies. The cooperation-competition syndrome is the hallmark of major powers' engagement in the Eurasian region. In the early years of independence both the tendencies co-existed, though on a low key. In the present decade these tendencies have sharpened and are likely to accelerate in the coming years. All the three powers have strong leaders at the helm of affairs who are determined to pursue their respective interests in an open and possibly even in an aggressive manner. In the emerging scenario the following observation is apt. One perceptive observer of the Central Asian scene noted, "The new great game is all about oil and gas. The imperial soldiers and spies of a bygone era have given way to engineers and deal makers as the states jockey for lucrative business of building pipelines to tap the vast resources of the landlocked region"<sup>32</sup>.

An interesting development in the unfolding interplay is the growing cooperation between Russia and China with both powers backing each other's core interests at the regional and global level. They have supported each other's multilateral regional initiatives—the EEU and the SREB. At the same time these regional initiatives also have a strong element of competition. Both the initiatives are anchored on Central Asia and the region is the key to the success of these regional projects. A competition is inevitable. Given China's assertive foreign policy and its economic clout the competition could accelerate in the coming years. On the other hand the trilateral cooperation between Russia, the US and the CAR in fighting non-traditional threats has lost its shine. The only sign of cooperation is the NDN. The residual military presence of the NATO in Afghanistan acts as a restraining factor for the insurgents, nevertheless insurgency is resurgent causing unpredictable scenario in the region. On the

issue of non-traditional threats Russia and China are cooperating as they apprehend the return of Central Asian, Caucasian and Uyghur fighters from the Middle East. At present it is not clear how the cooperation will shape, or how their cooperation could stop the penetration of these IS fighters from entering their countries. In this regard the SCO and the CSTO are ineffective in combating insurgency. Probably Russia and China view strategic understanding with Pakistan could resolve this issue as the insurgents groups are located on its territory and latter could control them.

The CAR nations are not mute spectators to the ongoing interplay of major powers. In fact they have welcomed their presence as it is in accordance with their professed dictum “No Single Power” shall dominate Central Asia. The idea of independence and territorial integrity is firmly etched in their national character. Today the CAR cannot be referred to as the ‘five Stans’. They have evolved their distinct national characteristics, social and economic objectives and a foreign policy that is based on their respective perceptions of national interests. For instance Turkmenistan has opted for a neutral status, recognised by the UN in 1995. However Turkmenistan participates in all UN initiatives, but scrupulously avoids joining any groupings or alliances that is not backed by the UN. Another dominant feature of CAR is the ethnic discord which has been the biggest source of conflict in the region. Any issue or a problem among the countries quickly takes an ethnic colour, whether it is the sharing water of trans boundary rivers or the settlement of borders in the Fergana Valley or the issue of climate change that has affected the Aral Sea, all the CAR nations have differing perspectives. What makes matters difficult is the ambitions of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to emerge as the leader of Central Asia. Any regional initiative taken by an outside power that is in tandem with their own goal of economic development could be considered favourably as long as it does not impinge on their sovereignty.

Similarly Afghanistan being a young democracy needs aid and investments. Afghanistan is also well endowed with raw material and minerals. After the bulk withdrawal of coalition forces, Afghanistan could get caught in the vortex of competition by the major powers. The resurgent insurgency could add another dimension to the competition.

## **An Interplay in Energy Resources**

The energy issue provided the Western nations with an opportunity to advance not only their economic but geopolitical interests as well. The strategy was to ensure that these countries were independent, prosperous and secure. Since the CAR nations were landlocked, the aim was "... continued dependence on Russian pipelines would be dangerous because it would allow Moscow to unilaterally raise tariffs and constrain Caspian exports or threaten these actions to win political or economic concessions from neighbours"<sup>33</sup>. In short the strategy was to end Russian monopoly and this approach took the shape of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) the first pipeline that skirted Russia and became operational in 2006. The second project supported by the West and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) is the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline. The troubled security situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan has made progress of this pipeline uncertain.

On the other hand Russia is a major player on the energy scene. The energy factor has helped Russia to deal with the major Western powers from a position of strength. In President Putin's view, "it is a sellers' market". In order to retain its status as an energy power. It is essential for Russia to ensure that the strategy of the rich energy states of Central Asia is not at variance with its own. Such coordination is necessary so as to ensure the success of its policy vis-à-vis the other major powers. Moreover Russia would not like to see a counter emerging in this sphere. In order to gain control of Turkmenistan's gas supplies, Russia proposed the idea of creating a Eurasian Gas Alliance on the pattern of OPEC. This suggestion had no takers in the CAR.

The competitive syndrome on the energy issue between western multinationals and Russia has not yet reached a high level. Except for the BTC, other projects such as the Nabucco gas pipeline, or Kazakhstan's efforts to diversify the pipeline infrastructure to the West have remained unfulfilled. In the eastern direction, however, China has offered an alternate pipeline infrastructure, and has emerged as a significant player on the Central Asian energy scene. The oil pipeline from Atyrau on the Kazakh sector of the Caspian Sea to Alashankou

in Xinjiang is operational. The Central Asia Gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to China via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan is also operational. Second oil and gas pipelines to China are under consideration by Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan respectively. Besides Chinese companies are actively prospecting for oil as well as investing in companies in Kazakhstan. The possibility of reasons other than purely economic considerations explains the Chinese involvement with Kazakhstan in the energy sector, while the active interaction on the part of China suggests that it would like to demonstrate to Russia that there are other alternatives to Russian projects. Although the competitive aspect between Russia and China is latent at present, the hallmark of their partnership is cooperation especially vis-à-vis the West. It is the regional dimension that is shaping this cooperative tendency. The US initiative 'Pivot to Asia' or the slide in US-Russian ties over the incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation and Russia's involvement in Syria and the support to Syrian leader Bashar-al-Assad have strengthened Russia's cooperative tendency with China.

While Russian and Chinese partnership is strong, strains of likely weakening it in future are also emerging. The geopolitical interests of both the powers are widening and also overlapping. These pertain to their vision of Eurasia and a multi-polar world order. The centrality of their vision lies in Central Asia. Russia and China have accorded the highest priority to their respective regional initiatives – the EEU and the SREB. The EEU is based on the Customs Union and in October 2011 President Putin announced the economically integrated Union – the EEU. In President Putin's view this sort of economic union constituted the basis for a higher level of integration in the Eurasian Union. It would become one of the poles of the contemporary world and would play the role of an effective bridge between Europe and the dynamic Asia-Pacific region<sup>34</sup>. The New Union came into effect on 1 January 2015 aims to create a single economic market, and was envisaged purely in economic terms. The new Union is to base itself on the legislative framework of the Customs Union and the Single Economic Space and to seek closer coordination of economic and monetary policy<sup>35</sup>. Russia began to pursue its EEU project vigorously. The EEU also acts as a barrier against external players including China. Besides

Russia has launched its second regional multilateral grouping – the CSTO. It is a security related initiative and aims to integrate the defence systems of its members; in Central Asia it is Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. As a leading member of the CSTO Russia has already established a large military presence in Central Asia. The pertinent question is: is such a large military presence necessary to protect its members and their borders? It appears as a projection of power rather than border protection. Both the regional initiatives taken together are expected to enhance Russian leverages and influence in Central Asia, and advance its goal of emerging as a pole/centre in a multi-polar world.

For China geopolitics and domestic state building imperatives are interwoven into its Eurasian pivot. The SREB is China's ambitious mega overland transport corridor project. In September 2013 during a visit to Kazakhstan President Jinping unveiled his "Chinese Dream" of reviving the ancient Silk Route through Central Asia. The motivation for the current Silk Route project is, as stated earlier, surplus steel, cement, growing trade with Central Asia and its own desire to emerge as a pole in the multi-polar world or perhaps Asia. The SREB also aims to connect to minerals, energy sources and access to cities, harbours and oceans. In the process China hopes to create interdependencies with the CAR nations and in the long run enhance its presence, build leverages and promote good neighbourliness and tranquility in the Western periphery. In this gigantic effort the role of CAR is indeed critical.

Although the EEU and the SREB have similar objectives, Russia and China agreed to align their projects during a visit to Moscow by President Jinping in May 2015. The question is: can the two projects having similar goals co-exist harmoniously? It may be so for the present as no details of the SREB's framework agreement is in public domain. It is a wholly Chinese initiative and not based on a consultative mechanism. Hence it is difficult to comment on its future trajectory. Another pertinent question is what role the two countries assign to SCO? Economic development and infrastructure projects are already on SCO's agenda. Russia would like the SCO to function as an umbrella organization for



the EEU and SREB. Probably China may not concur with this idea, especially now that the SCO has expanded to include India and Pakistan, during the Astana Summit in June 2017. Nevertheless the three regional groupings are competing for the Central Asian space.

At the other end of the spectrum are the CAR occupying key importance in the regional initiatives. Afghanistan has an observer status in the SCO and is gradually acquiring significance in China's overland transport corridor as well its enormous natural resources and minerals that it would like to exploit. The CARs, however, have a differing perspectives on these groupings. A well-known senior Kazakh analyst Sultan Akimbekov perceives, "Moscow is more intent on making a political statement by making the EEU into an umbrella to bring together a large number of states in the post-Soviet space as a means of demonstrating its power and sway over its weaker neighbours rather than forge an effective economic grouping. Additionally he questions whether the EEU has in fact brought tangible economic benefits to Kazakhstan? ... In fact Kazakhstan has emerged as an increasingly important sales market for Russia and Belarus"<sup>36</sup>. However, incorporation of the Crimea has caused unease among the countries of the post-Soviet space because President Putin justified the action on the ground of protecting ethnic Russians. Kazakhstan has a large presence of ethnic Russians and the following statement by President Putin at a pro-Kremlin youth camp in August 2014 added to the Kazakh fears. He said, "Kazakhs never had Statehood and that ultimately it is part of the '*Russki Mir*' (Russian world)". This statement drew an angry reaction from President Nursultan Nazarbayev who took to state television to assert, "Kazakhstan has the right to withdraw from the EEU, and that Kazakhstan will not be part of organisations that pose a threat to our independence"<sup>37</sup>. Similarly former President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov remarked that the developments in Ukraine are worrisome as it could have an impact on the on-going border disputes with its neighbours. Many observers have doubts and suspicions that Russia's true political and ideological goals in creating the Customs Union and then the EEU. Recently Russia and Belarus rejected Kyrgyz agricultural products as they did not qualify for a standard set by

the EEU. So far only 12 agricultural companies have been allowed to export their produce to EEU member countries. The question asked is, “how does the EEU benefit Kyrgyzstan?” In such an eventuality how does Kyrgyzstan export its farm produce? Tajikistan has not joined the EEU as it fears that Russian goods will flood its market, which will be a disincentive to its own industrial and economic development. However, the EEU has a structure— there is the Eurasian Economic Commission that takes care of legal matters. Meetings of the members are held regularly; both at the summit and ministerial level. Here it is worth mentioning that President Putin characterised the collapse of the Soviet Union as the “Great Geo-Political “disaster in Eurasia”<sup>38</sup>. Possibly President Putin hopes to retain Russian influence over the post-Soviet space, through his chosen mechanisms, the CSTO and the EEU.

On the SREB the CARs have extended a cautious welcome to it primarily because they look forward to Chinese investments for their own infrastructure projects. Kazakhstan is central to all north-south and east-west transport corridors; Turkmenistan has launched a major effort to emerge as a transport hub, connecting north-south and east-west. The Lapis Lazali transport corridor connects Tajikistan with Turkmenistan through Afghanistan, and the Persian Gulf corridor an Uzbek initiative connects with Oman via Turkmenistan and Iran. Both these projects are awaiting investments. However, there is a major concern among the CARs as so far no framework agreement regarding SREB is available. They apprehend that China will send in workers and build roads to ship out energy resources, but will not protect them from external threats<sup>39</sup>. Turkmenistan technically requires that a project’s workforce consists of seventy percent local employees, and Uzbekistan mandates that Chinese companies can only send management personnel, not labourers<sup>40</sup>. Professor Shi Yin hong of International Relations, Renmin University, China has placed the issue of SREB in the right perspective. He writes,

*“It is extremely important to realize fully that the huge infrastructure systems China now aspires to construct on the sovereign lands of many countries in Central, Southeast and South Asia have by their essential feature, almost “natural” inherent sensitivities.*

*These countries of course hold related doubts and worries about their long-term sovereignty, autonomy and distribution of prospective benefits<sup>41</sup>.*

Several doubts have been raised regarding the feasibility of the SREB. For instance “The success of the Silk Road is not considered as given by any means, and the question of what economic benefit it can generate over the long-term remains unanswered. What happens, if the new infrastructure is under used, because sea transport turns out to be more profitable and efficient?”<sup>42</sup>. Till the details of the framework agreement are available the CAR nations will have to wait. Reports suggest that a law is on the anvil that would allow China to send its troops outside with the permission of the host country.

Russian-Chinese cooperation in Afghanistan is evident as both share wide security interests. The fear of the IS expanding its presence in Afghanistan would have repercussions on Central Asia also. The two countries are compelled to look for measures that could bring stability and security to Afghanistan. Many observers who view the diminishing US role in Afghanistan as a sign of its weakening position; the American National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster put all such talk to rest when he visited Afghanistan in April 2017. McMaster affirmed that the US was committed to give the Afghan State, the Afghan security forces the strength they need<sup>43</sup>. What kind of role the US will play in Afghanistan will determine the extent of Russian-Chinese partnership.

From the foregoing what stands out is that, there is a wide area of convergence between Russian and Chinese interests. The deepening of their partnership emanates from their ambition to emerge as future global powers. Both have initiated their respective regional projects that have global ramifications. Besides the need to counter the uni-polar world order of the West also adds a major input to the partnership. Paradoxically these very objectives contain elements of divergence. In fact two major land powers with geographical proximity and a common boundary would find it difficult to achieve true cooperation. Here it is worth mentioning the apt observation of former Prime Minister of Singapore and an astute politician Lee Kuan Yew who said that China will not acquiesce to a status quo indefinitely .... Competition is inevitable, but conflict is not. For

the US the significance of Central Asia and Afghanistan lies in is geopolitical location flanking two future powers who could challenge American leadership in world affairs. However, in this cooperation-competition syndrome the role of local actors, the CAR nations and Afghanistan, is of equal importance. The success of Russian and Chinese regional projects would depend on CARs perception of their respective national interests. Will Russia and China be able to elicit a favourable response from local actors?

### **Options for India**

From our discussion of the interests and policies of major powers in Central Asia and Afghanistan we find that an interplay of cooperative and competitive tendencies is accelerating. In the initial years these tendencies were on a low key and the powers pursued them at different levels. A single issue, for instance, the energy issue the West wanted to reduce Russian monopoly by building export pipeline infrastructure bypassing Russia. On the other hand Russia was seeking to bring the energy strategy of rich CAR in tandem with its own. In the second decade of the present century both the tendencies have intensified as the major powers are focusing on the whole region and not a single issue, whether cooperative or competitive. The interplay has encompassed many issues such as geopolitics, social, political and economics. This wider sweep has manifested in the form of regional multilateral groupings primarily the EEU and the SREB. Given this emerging geopolitical scenario where major powers have well established presence, can India increase its engagement in a region that is part of its geopolitical space? What are India's options to enhance its engagement with its extended / strategic neighbourhood? Indeed there is potential that needs to be explored in a sustained manner.

### ***Enhancement of India's Central Asia and Afghanistan Engagement***

The most important factor that augurs well for India is the fund of goodwill it enjoys among the CAR nations. India is perceived as a friendly neighbor with no hidden agenda and that it is not seeking space or leverages in their region. India's engagement with the CAR and Afghanistan has been on an upward

trajectory ever since the Taliban was ousted from power. It opened a window of opportunity to restore its traditional ties of friendship with Afghanistan and reconnect with Central Asia. Indian goal of stability and security in the Central Asian region coincided with the broadening of its strategic vision. The changed proactive approach was evident in the Annual Report of the Ministry of Defence(2002-03). It was stated, “Relations based on a shared commitment to open and progressive societies, secularism and democracy have been reinforced by similarity of views in the fight against terrorism”.As a consequence India’s policy towards the region became vigorous. In the changing dynamics of the region Afghanistan was no longer viewed as a buffer, but a connector of regions.

A landmark development in India’s attempt to give a major thrust to its policy was in 2012 when India launched its flagship project the Connect Central Asia Policy (CCAP) which aims to provide a new momentum to its engagement with the CAR and to enhance its strategic space. Importantly the new initiative has raised the earlier conceptual framework of “extended neighbourhood” to connecting with CAR. The policy was enunciated by E. Ahmed, former Minister of State of External Affairs at the First India-Central Asia Dialogue in Bishkek in June 2012. In his words,

*“India is now looking intently at the region through the framework of Connect Central Asia Policy, which is based on proactive political, economic and people-to-people engagement with the Central Asian countries both individually and collectively ... We must factor in the regional situation and especially the challenge of re-building Afghanistan ... One way is to work towards converting Afghanistan into hub of trade and energy, connecting Central Asia and South Asia”.*<sup>44</sup>

The CAR nations welcomed the enunciation of CCAP as there was a wide area of commonality of interests on issues of regional security and stability. Here mention must be made of Vice President Hamid Ansari’s visit to Tajikistan in April 2013. During the visit President Emomali Rahmon stressed the need for joint consultative effort before the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan. Regional stability was of prime concern to his country. Echoing similar views Vice President Ansari said, “Both the President and I agree that nations in the

region as well as the international community should strengthen Afghanistan's capacity to maintain peace, stability and prosperity of the Afghan people. We also agreed to strengthen our cooperation in multilateral organisations. Hence we find that CCAP has laid equal emphasis on strengthening the bilateral content of India's ties with the CARs, as well as on a multilateral and a cooperative approach. Institutional interaction in security, economic and cultural spheres became robust. New areas for cooperation could be water management, climate change etc.

The CCAP process was taken to new heights by Prime Minister Narendra Modi when he significantly visited all the five CAR nations in July 2015. It was an acknowledgement of their individuality as nation States as well as the significance of the Central Asian region for India came out clearly in Prime Minister Modi's speeches during the visit. Uzbekistan was the first country in Prime Minister Modi's Central Asian itinerary where he put the significance of Central Asia for India in a perspective. He said, "Our relationship with the region has ancient roots and has left a strong imprint on both. It now occupies a significant place in India's future"<sup>45</sup>. In Turkmenistan a Defence Cooperation Agreement was signed which would provide a framework for intensifying bilateral defence and security cooperation through exchanges of high level and mid-level visits, training and dialogue. In Tajikistan Prime Minister Modi stressed the cooperation in agriculture. He said, "We have created the most successful cooperative movement in dairy and one of the best dairy processing industries". Further he mentioned, "we have done well with micro irrigation systems ... We can collaborate in developing hybrid cotton and wheat two of your most important crops".

The strategic significance of Afghanistan needs no reiteration. There exists a wide area of convergence of interests between the two countries; security, economic development and widespread Indian soft power. The importance of Afghanistan was succinctly stated by the Prime Minister Modi during his visit to Kabul in September 2016. He said, "India's abiding support for a unified sovereign, democratic peaceful, stable and prosperous Afghanistan". On the other hand the Afghan people exuded great confidence in Prime Minister Modi's leadership. Dr Davood Moradian, Director General of the Afghan Institute

for Strategic Studies wrote, “However, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government, India’s Afghanistan policy is shifting from a reluctant albeit to a friendly one, to a more confident and multidimensional approach”. Apart from capacity building in the security sphere, the main focus of India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement, other areas where India could productively engage are infrastructure projects particularly in the provinces and rural areas, skill development in small scale community development projects and internal security, education particularly for women health care services are vital areas that can lead Afghanistan on the path of progress. Indian involvement can be even more vigorous provided it has assured land access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. It would help CAR in energising the southern vector of their foreign policies and simultaneously assist project Afghanistan as the land bridge to Eurasia including Central Asia. Hence the connectivity issue is crucial for India’s outreach to the region.

### ***Connectivity Issue***

There are two options for India to connect with the region; one is the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC) and second is via the Chabahar port, and for both the options Iran holds tremendous significance as the key connector to reach out to Central Asia and Afghanistan. Iranian President Khatami’s visit to India in January 2003 paved the way for INSTC a vital transit corridor to Central Asia. The INSTC connects St. Petersburg with Mumbai and is a multimodal transport corridor; sea, rail, sea and surface transport. Bandar Abbas strategically located on the Persian Gulf is the transit point for the onward journey to Russia. The route involves moving freight from India, Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia. The objective of the corridor is to increase trade connectivity between major cities such as Mumbai, Moscow, Teheran, Baku, Bandar Abbas, Astrakhan, Bandar Anzali, and so on. Through this transportation route, Indian exports could potentially get competitive advantage due to lower cost and less delivery time. Studies show that the route can reduce time and cost of container delivery by 30 – 40 percent.

During the Iranian President Khatami’s visit the two countries also signed an agreement to allow Indian goods bound for Afghanistan and Central Asia



a preferential treatment and tariff reductions at the newly constructed port of Chabahar. Though the INSTC is operational, it is not functioning at the desired capacity. The difficulties are largely because of poor coordination and bureaucratic delays. A Coordination Committee should be set to focus on harmonisation of rules, regulations and procedures so that delays could be avoided. The physical infrastructure and development work that would occur in the process could act as a tool for strengthening cooperation in other areas. It will provide an opportunity to also assess the economic potential of these countries as well as increase people to people contacts. Recently Russia has shown renewed keenness to re-energise this north-south corridor. In July 2016 a meeting of officials from India, Iran, Russia and Azerbaijan was held in Moscow for this purpose. Prior to Prime Minister Modi's visit to Russia in June 2017, the Ministry of External Affairs organized a conference of all stakeholders on INSTC. One of the highlights of the visit was an agreement to re-vitalise the INSTC. An interesting aspect of the visit was that both the leaders flagged off a motor rally from St Petersburg to Iran covering the surface transport route. With Azerbaijan associating with the INSTC, the possibility to traverse this route via its territory has also opened up. The rail connectivity between Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran had considerably eased the flow of freight. Today the INSTC has expanded to include new members: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine, Belarus, Oman and Bulgaria (Observer). There are plans to connect INSTC with Chabahar.

The Iranian port of Chabahar is located on the Makran coast in Southeastern Iran. Chabahar faces the Indian Ocean and is a deep water port. Currently Chabahar has a capacity to handle 2.5 million tonnes of cargo per year and Iran would like to raise the capacity to 12.5 million tons. A Free Trade and an industrial zone near the port city has been established.

The Chabahar project received a major thrust forward during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Iran in May 2016. The high point of the visit was the Trilateral Transport and Trade Agreement between India, Iran and Afghanistan. It was indeed a historic development in the history of the region. As observed by Prime Minister Modi, "... it could also alter the course of history in the



region”; while President Hassan Rouhani spoke about the Chabahar port as “defining partnership which has the potential of connecting regions”. The crux of the agreement is the development, upgradation and operationalisation of the Chabahar port, a port of immense strategic significance for both the countries. Chabahar also offers India immense advantages in terms of cutting costs and land connectivity to the Caucasus, Russia and Europe. It is absolutely essential that implementation of the Trilateral Agreement should not be tardy from the Indian side. A timely fulfillment of its commitments will strengthen ties in other areas as well and pave the way for a strong partnership on regional and global issues of common interest.

Besides the Iranian option, India is also involved in the TAPI gas pipeline project, which is designed to bring Turkmen gas to India via Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, security situation in the Af-Pak region has made the progress of the project uncertain. Another effort in this direction for India is to diplomatically energise the Istanbul Process initiated by the ‘Heart of Asia’ Conference. It has been endorsed by the participating countries to make Afghanistan as the land bridge connecting South Asia with Central Asia. President Trump’s revival of the New SILK Road strategy and importantly its implementation would be welcomed by India.

Besides India has regular flights to Ashgabat, Almaty and Tashkent. Reportedly direct flights to Bishkek and Dushanbe are under consideration. Uzbekistan has declared the city of Navoi in the NorthWest as an international airport and has set up special free economic zone in the city. According to reports flights from Mumbai once a week take off for Navoi carrying cargo mostly from South Korea.

### ***Indian Interaction with Russia and other Major Powers***

As the world entered the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the geopolitical scenario was in a state of flux. Western coalition forces were in Afghanistan, transnational threats carried out by non-State actors had come to occupy the centre stage of international security. In the changing geopolitical scenario, Russian policy began to focus on a collaborative approach at the regional level. In 2001 the SCO was formed

and in 2003 the CSTO was established; these multilateral regional organisations became the instrument of Russian policy. India was not a member of any of the two groupings. India's full membership in the SCO was affirmed at the Astana Summit in June 2017. Apart from its bilateral context, India's membership of the SCO would open a window of opportunity for India to engage with the CARs at the regional level.

Russia is an influential player in Central Asia, for Russian language, education, migrations and security provider to CARs are strong factors in its favour. Therefore, in order to emerge as an important player in the region, India also has an option of re-energising its Russian connection. India and Russia can skillfully work on areas that both perceive as competitive in nature and consolidate areas of cooperation. The need to give their relationship a forward thrust is the focus of their policies. India is set to formalise a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the EEU. The FTA is expected to open a huge market with a trade of USD 37 to USD 62 billion<sup>46</sup>. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the Chief Guest at the 21<sup>st</sup> St. Petersburg International Economic Forum. 70th anniversary of establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the two countries was also celebrated on this occasion. Prime Minister Modi's visit to Russia (June 2017) can be called a milestone one in revitalising the India Russia ties. While the upward swing in India Russia relations is evident. In its South Asian policy the primacy of India for Russia would continue. As a pole in multi-polar world, both India and Russia have the potential to emerge as players of consequence. They help each other in maintaining a favourable balance of power in Asia.

India can also seek the cooperation of the US, Japan and the European Union. The US is a pivotal player in the region, whereas Japanese Overseas Development Assistance in Central Asia and Afghanistan is high. Japan has offered to cooperate with India in the development of the Iranian Chabahar port project. In Afghanistan Japan gave assistance in restoring the Bamiyan statues of Buddha. German involvement in educational activities in Central Asia and training in border management is well known. Since these countries also share India's goal of stability and security, an intensification of diplomatic

activities is equally essential. Thus the options before India are realistic and will have to be pursued in a sustained manner.

### **Concluding Observations**

The distinct feature of the present day interplay in Central Asia is the partnership as well as the elements of competition between Russia and China. A view among scholars and observers is that the cooperative tendency will continue and that competition even in the long-run is out of question. However, cooperation motivated for tactical reasons which is the case of Russia-China relations cannot be a durable factor in the long-run. Russian-Chinese cooperation has global dimension; each wanting to attain the global power status. In view of developments in the post-Crimean phase for Russia and Chinese focus on 'greater Eurasia' in the wake of American Rebalancing strategy in the Indo-Pacific the need for cooperation is the hallmark of Russia-China relations. The support for each other's core interests is necessary for the present. Their cooperation is to deal with the West particularly the US from a position of strength. At present the cooperative tendency is evident also in their common approach to multi-polarity. Both would like to see a global order where several centres of powers exist, so as to maintain the balance of power guided by International law with the centrality accorded to the UN. But from the long term perspective each power aspires to emerge as a centre.

A contributory factor is the regional security since the US occupies a pivotal position in Afghanistan even after the post 2014. It is in the interest of both Russia and China to see a further reduction of Western military presence from Afghanistan. On the other hand, there is a view that both Russia and China, in fact, would like the military presence to continue as they would not like to get involved militarily. Hence the first quadrilateral meeting between Russia, China, Pakistan and the Taliban was their diplomatic initiative, which however, was a non-starter. Except for legitimising the Taliban as a factor in Afghan politics, subsequent such meetings did not have the desired result.

At the bilateral level China has been Russia's first trading market in consumer goods and other items, while the major items it gets from Russia are arms and

energy resources. On the whole Chinese policy is cautious, as its mega geo-strategic project the SREB is still in the initial stages.

The competitive element in Russian and Chinese relations is also becoming apparent. Viewed from the geopolitical perspective Russia has been a continental power aspiring for great power status, a theme running throughout its history. Its integrationist projects the EEU and CSTO amply reflect this aspiration. China's flagship connectivity project, the SREB, the Maritime Silk Route (MSR) and the One Belt One Road initiative taken together undoubtedly have a large measure of geopolitics, while economic considerations are at a secondary level. For both the EEU and the SREB Central Asia is of critical importance. Their interests overlap considerably in Central Asia. The success of these projects is linked to the response of the CAR nations. Can the two powers agree for true accommodation? In this regard the SCO cannot play a positive role as there is no common vision. Since geopolitics is the chief motivating factor the question is can two potential global powers sharing a lengthy land boundary in the Far East and Central Asia achieve permanent accommodation? Historically speaking their relations, whether empires or States, have often verged on hostility. In fact in 1969 the two powers fought a short border war on the Ussuri River. Although the border dispute has been resolved, have the two powers been able to shed their latent mutual suspicion?

In view of China's growing economic profile and an asymmetry of economic power there is a view that Russia is a junior partner of China. Although Russia at present is economically weak as compared to China, it will never accept the status of a junior partner. What earlier former Prime Minister Primakov had said holds true even now. He had said, "Russia is not a State that can be led". Instances of subtle competition are apparent. This can be discerned from the following observations. The recent proposal by China to establish an anti-terrorist alliance with Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan excluded Russia. A new report in Russian newspaper *Izvestiia* quotes Andrei Serenko, an expert at the Center for Modern Afghanistan Studies, Moscow, saying that China could be building an alternative to CSTO and if Russia does not join this initiative it would reveal that China does not see Russia as an ally in Central Asia. China

strengthened its position as economic partner number one for the CAR. In 2013 Central Asian trade with China reached USD 46 billion against only USD 31 billion with Russia. Despite its economic presence Central Asian elites remain oriented to Russia. Russia has established the Eurasian Development Bank, while China is lacking its Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. At the broader level Russian focus is on BRICS, but reportedly China has suggested its expansion and conversion to BRICS plus. In reality there is a surfeit of multilateral groupings and addition of more members makes its goals diffused and ineffective. As the contours of SREB are made public there is a real possibility that competition could accelerate. Here it is worth repeating what former Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew and also a keen observer of the Chinese scene said “China is not a status quo power, competition is inevitable but not conflict”.

The third dimension is the role of the US. Afghanistan is the central concern of the US. Insurgency in Afghanistan is active in the region and the challenges to US integrity emanate from these transnational threats located here. Besides Afghanistan’s geopolitical location adjoining Central Asia also offers an opportunity to the US to monitor Russian and Chinese developments and moves. Recently President Trump announced the revival of its New Silk Road Strategy which aims to connect Central Asia with South Asia.

The CAR nations are also important players in this interplay, since their region is the key to the players. The CAR will determine the extent and shape of these initiatives depending on their ability to manoeuvre its strategic space. The SREB is wholly a Chinese initiative and its details are awaited. Another facet is the Russian inability to forge common interests with CARs on the basis of equal partnership for mutual benefit. In the ongoing wider interplay the role of Afghanistan is minimal.

There is no doubt that the Central Asian and Afghan space is witnessing an accelerated interplay of cooperation and competition. The main motivation of these powers is primarily global in nature; to achieve great power status, but grounded in the Central Asian region for this purpose. Indian interests are

basically regional in nature; to strengthen their secular democratic and modern regimes and to assist in their economic transition to a free market economy. India must strengthen its enormous goodwill by giving its soft power a greater play covering all areas. For this it is necessary for India to help the CARs' orientation in the southern direction. In this context land connectivity issue is the crux of India's policy. In this context Indian policy will have to give a major push to its ties with Iran. Implementation of the INSTC and the Chabahar port development should be put on fast track. At the regional level to participate actively in regional conferences that aim to stabilise the situation in the region such as the Istanbul Process and the SCO. Apart from bilateral and multilateral engagements, India can also forge partnerships in the region with other countries on the basis of mutual interest.

## Endnotes

- 1 "Nezavisimaya Gazeta", July 29, 1993 in Current Digest of Post-Soviet Press (CDPSP), August 18, 1993.
- 2 Quoted in Stanly Kober, NATO Expansion and the Danger of a Second Cold War, [www.Eurasia.Net/org/Insight](http://www.Eurasia.Net/org/Insight), by Igor Torbakov, "Re-examining Old Concepts About the Caucasus and Central Asia", February 6, 2004.
- 3 A. Dugin in Russian. Quoted by Graham Smith, *The Post-Soviet States: Mapping the Politics of Transition* (London, 1999), p. 57.
- 4 Ibid., p. 65.
- 5 CDPSP, vol. 53, no. 42 (2001), p. 17.
- 6 Bertil Nvrgren, *The Rebuilding of Greater Russia: Putin's Foreign Policy Towards the CIS Countries* (London and New York, 2008), p. 8.
- 7 Alexander Lukin, *Pivot to Asia: Russia's Foreign Policy Enters the 21st Century* (New Delhi, 2017), p. 39.
- 8 Ibid., p. 102.
- 9 Marcin Jaczmarski Witold Rodkiewicz, "Russia Greater Eurasia and China's New Silk Road Adaptation Instead of Competition. OSW commentary.<http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publication/osw-commentary/2016-07-2016/Russia-greater-eurasia-and-china-new-silk-road-adaptation> acc 4 April 2017.
- 10 Quoted by Meryem Kirimili, "Uzbekistan in the New World Order", *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1997, p. 60.
- 11 Alexander Cooley and Marlene Laruelle, "The Changing Logic of Russian Strategy in Central Asia: From Privileged Sphere to Divide and Rule?" [www.ponars.org](http://www.ponars.org).
- 12 Alexander Lukin, n. 7, p. 30.
- 13 Dmitri Trenin, Oleg Kulakov Alexey Malashenko and Petr Topychkanov, "A Russian Strategy for Afghanistan: After the Coalition Troop Withdrawal <http://Carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=55669#acc>. 16 August 2014.
- 14 Huasheng Zhao, "Central Asia in China's Diplomacy", in Eugene Rumer and others, ed. *Central Asia: Views from Washington, Moscow and Beijing* (London, 2007), p. 143.
- 15 Dr. Chen Xiangyang, "Assessment of International Situation and China's Security Environment in 2005", *Foreign Affairs Journal* (Beijing), no. 78, December 2005, p. 24.
- 16 Frankopan Peter, *The Silk Roads a New History of the World* (Bloomsberry, London, 2015).
- 17 "China's Great Game: Road to a New Empire", Charles Clover and Lucy Hornby, *Financial Times* (London), 12 October 2011.

- 18 Vitaly Vorobyov, "Beijing's New Foreign Policy: Is China to Build a New Economic Silk Road?", *Russia in Global Affairs*, vol. 12, no. 1, January-March 2014, p. 88.
- 19 Alexander Lukin, n. 7. For an excellent assessment of Chinese Writings (in Chinese). See pp. 207-219.
- 20 "Russia and China in 2016: Asymmetry or Harmonization of Relations? <http://www.valdai.club.com/news/russia-and-china-in-2016/>.acc.19 May 2016.
- 21 AdilkauKenov, "Chinese Diplomacy in Central Asia: A Critical Assessment", *Central Asian Affairs* (Almaty), Issue 1/2009, p. 28.
- 22 Talmiz Ahmed, "Who's Afraid of One Belt One Road?", 3 June 2016, <http://the.wire.in/40388/one-belt-one-road-shaping-connectivities-and-politics-in-the-21st-century/>.
- 23 Martin Steff, "President's Policy on Russia Faulted as too Optimistic", *Washington Times*, 5 March 1995. Quoted in Stanley Kober, *NATO Expansion and the Danger of a Second Cold War*.
- 24 Igor Torbakov, "Re-examining Old Concepts About the Caucasus and Central Asia". 6 February 2004. [www.Eurasia.Net.org/Insight](http://www.Eurasia.Net.org/Insight). Acc. 16 November 2004.
- 25 Stephen Blank, "US Interests in Central Asia and the Caucasus", *Strategic Studies*, March 2007, p. 3.
- 26 Ivan Iniutin, "Russian Strategy in Central Asia", *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 2006, vol. 2(38), p.4.
- 27 Quoted by Timofey Bordachev, "Russia and China in Central Asia: The Great Win-Win Game", <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/valdav/Russia-and-China-in-Central-Asia-The-Great-win-win-game-18259>.
- 28 *The Indian Express*, 18 April 2017.
- 29 Shahram Abarzadeh, *Uzbekistan and the United States: Authoritarianism, Islamism and Washington's Security Agenda* (London, Zed Books, 2005), p. 65.
- 30 *Strategic Digest* (New Delhi), September 1997, pp. 1378-1383.
- 31 Neil MacFarlane, "The Regionalism in Central Asia", *International Affairs* (London), no. 3, 2004, p. 453.
- 32 *The Times of Central Asia* (Bishkek), 29 November 2001.
- 33 Neil MacFaarlane, n. 31. P. 453.
- 34 Lavina Lee and Graeme Gill, "India, Central Asia and the Eurasian Union: A New Ballgame", *India Quarterly*, 71(2), 2015, p. 118.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- 36 "Understanding China's Eurasian Pivot: The One Belt One Road Strategy provides a Guide to the Future of China in Eurasia", September 10, 2015 <http://the.diplomat.com/2015/09/understanding-china's-eurasean-pivot/>.acc. 19 May 2016, p. 26.



- 37 Ibid., p. 26.
- 38 G. Mustafa, "The Concept of 'Eurasia', Kazakhstan's Eurasian Policy and its Implications", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 4(2013), p. 169.
- 39 Timofei Bordachev, "The Eurasian Year in Russian Foreign Policy", Valdai International Club, Moscow, <http://valdaiclub.com/opinion/highlights/eurasian-year-in-russian-foreign-policy> accessed 19 May 2016.
- 40 Sarah Lain, "China's Silk Road in Central Asia: Transformative or Exploitative?", *Financial Times* (London), 27 April 2016.
- 41 Shi Yinhong, "Belt and Road and Western Pacific Strategic Economy with Strategic Military", *Central Asia Affairs* (Astana), no. 2, 2016. P. 10.
- 42 Ivan Timofeev and Elena Alekseenkova, "Eurasia in Russian Foreign Policy: Interests. Opportunities and Constraints", Russia/NIS Center, IFRI, Paris, December 2015, p. 19.
- 43 Raja Mohan, "The Kabul Convergence", *Indian Express*, 18 April 2017.
- 44 Keynote Address by Minister of State Shri E. Ahmed at First India-Central Asia Dialogue, 12 June 2012, Bishkek, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.
- 45 Media Statement by the Prime Minister, [www.mea.gov.in](http://www.mea.gov.in).
- 46 *The Hindu*, 29 April 2017.

## VIF PUBLICATIONS

Title	Author	Year
Towards A Stable Afghanistan: The Way Forward	A report of Joint Working Group of VIF & RUSI	Jan. 2012
Nepal: Contemporary Political Scenario and Portents for Future	C D Sahay	Oct. 2012
China's Strategic Posture in Tibet Autonomous Region and India's Response	VIF Fellows	Oct. 2012
India: Internal Security Challenges and Responses	Prakash Singh	Jun. 2013
Chinese Intelligence : From a Party Outfit to Cyber Warriors	Ajit Doval, KC	Jul. 2013
Durand Line: History, Legality & Future	Arka Biswas	Sept. 2013
India: Strategic Challenges and Responses	Amb Kanwal Sibal	2013
VIF JINF Joint Study Launched - Framework for Indo-Japanese Strategic Partnership and Cooperation	VIF & JINF	Jun. 2013
The Communist Party-PLA Equation in China	Lt Gen Gautam Banerjee	Dec. 2014
ZARB-e-AZB: An Evaluation of Pakistan Army's Anti-Taliban Operations in North Waziristan	Sushant Sareen	Dec. 2014
The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: An Assessment	Prof Nirmala Joshi	Oct. 2015

Title	Author	Year
China- One Belt & One Road Initiative: Strategic & Economic Implications	Prof Gautam Sen	Jan. 2016
Corridor Calculus : China Pakistan Economic Corridor and China's Comprador Investment Model in Pakistan	Sushant Sateen	Mar. 2016
China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Old String with New Pearls	Cmde Gopal Suri	Mar. 2016
Russia, Europe and The United States: Emerging Power Play	Dr. Harinder Sekhon	Jul. 2016
Awaiting RMA : Indian Army Strategic Gaps in India's Net Centricity What is Cyber Security? Status and Challenges: India	Lt. Gen. Davinder Kumar	Oct. 2016
Freebies and Good Governance	B. P. Singh	Oct. 2016
Sino-Indian Boundary Dispute and Indo-Centric Reflections on China's Military Capabilities, thoughts and Options in the Near Future	Maj. Gen V. K. Shrivastava	Oct. 2016
Terror Financing and The Global CTF Regime	C D Sahay & Abhinav Pandya	Jul. 2017

## About the VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

The Vivekananda International Foundation is an independent non-partisan institution that conducts research and analysis on domestic and international issues, and offers a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution. Some of India's leading practitioners from the fields of security, military, diplomacy, government, academia and media fields have come together to generate ideas and stimulate action on national security issues.

The defining feature of VIF lies in its provision of core institutional support which enables the organization to be flexible in its approach and proactive in changing circumstances, with a long-term focus on India's strategic, developmental and civilisational interests. The VIF aims to channelize fresh insights and decades of experience harnessed from its faculty into fostering actionable ideas for the nation's stakeholders.

Since its establishment, VIF has successfully embarked on quality research and scholarship in an effort to highlight issues in governance and strengthen national security. This is being actualized through numerous activities like seminars, round tables, interactive-dialogues, Vimarsh (public discourse), conferences and briefings. The publications of the VIF form the lasting deliverables of the organisation's aspiration to impact on the prevailing discourse on issues concerning India's national interest.



### VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

3, San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi – 110021

Phone: +91-11-24121764, 24106698

Email: [info@vifindia.org](mailto:info@vifindia.org), Website: <http://www.vifindia.org>

Follow us on [twitter@vifindia](https://twitter.com/vifindia)