

# **THE DIVERGENT PLANE OF INTERESTS: SECURITY AND COUNTER-TERRORISM DYNAMICS OF CENTRAL ASIA**

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## **Introduction**

The region involving the Central Asian Republics (CARs) has played host to various overt and covert rivalries and continues to be in the proverbial eye of the storm owing to its strategic location, a huge treasure of mines and minerals, and being the progeny of a once superpower. Herald Mackinder in his famous Heartland Theory declared Central Asia as the heart of international political structure. “Whoever controlled Central Asia would wield enormous power,” said Mackinder.<sup>1</sup> The oft theorized Great Game between the British India and Tsarist Russia reflects Mackinder’s approach. The Great Game was played primarily for geo-strategic interests in the Central Asian region. In the present era, it has been renamed as the New Great Game, which involves a myriad of geopolitical, geo-strategic, and geo-economic interests, involving energy security as well. It is a general understanding that the US has replaced Great Britain in the New Great Game. China and Russia, on the other hand, having keen interest in their neighbouring region, have also jumped into the complex strategic milieu.

These great powers have convoluted relationships with each other, which often overlap. They contradict, contrast, and cooperate with each other at

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the same time. The situation has been explained by Tahir Amin in *World Orders in Central Asia*.<sup>2</sup> He talks about Sinic, Slavic, Western liberal, Islamic, and residual socialist orders which are actively involved in the region. The West, primarily the US, is interested in hydrocarbons and containment of terrorism in the region, which is feared to be spreading across Afghanistan. Chinese interests are largely the same, but Beijing is very much interested in Central Asian markets as well. Russia, on the other hand, still considers the region as its backyard and an area of its historical influence.

Despite having contradicting interests, all of these countries consider terrorism a big threat for the region and want to counter it in strong terms. Therefore, all have charted out individual and joint strategies to counter it at different levels. Concurrently, Islamism is seen as a potential threat for regional as well as global peace and stability. Having close proximity to Afghanistan and presence of religious extremist/terrorist organizations in the form of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Hizb-ut-Tahrir, Islamic Jihad Union, and other smaller groups, the Central Asian Republics (CARs) are always under pressure from various geo-strategic directions. The CARs themselves are also worried about the rise of extremist elements and their transnational linkages, especially in Afghanistan and Syria. Therefore, they tend to welcome any initiatives taken by international and regional powers against extremist elements. Looking from the lenses of Mackinder and Tahir Amin, the Central Asian region seems to be extremely important in current and future international politics. Being landlocked, the CARs are heavily dependent on their neighbouring states—especially China and Russia—for their external linkages.

This paper attempts to analyze and understand the security and counter-terrorism efforts being carried out in the region by the major powers—China, Russia, and the US. The paper addresses various inter-related issues including multiple interests of the major powers and their varying degrees of convergence and divergence, the major extremist security concerns of the region, measures taken by the CARs at the national level to address extremist threats, and how the regional and global powers have cooperated in the recent past in order to improve security situation in the region.

### **Russia and its backyard: changing postures of the CARs**

Seventy years of colonization by the Soviet Union connected Central Asia with mainland Russia in such strong ways that despite its utmost efforts and external support, Central Asia is unable to come out of Russian influence and dependence even after 25 years of independence. Most of the Central Asian oil and gas pipelines are connected to international markets through Russia. After independence, however, two alternative routes for hydrocarbons have been constructed: one through China, and the other through Iran.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the physical geography of the region does not let Central Asia reduce its dependence on Russia in this regard. Moreover, a large number of ethnic Russians still live in Central Asia, notably in Kazakhstan where they constitute the largest ethnic minority.

Another reason for CARs' dependence on Russia is their authoritative regimes. The regimes of Central Asia are the old socialist remnants that prefer Soviet style of government. Moscow can best support the regimes as they appear willing to align themselves with the Russian interests in the region. The support and cooperation is not lopsided though. The CARs expect reciprocity based on a mutually agreed apparatus that includes cooperation on containment of terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, and alien values.<sup>4</sup>

Russia has usually been supportive of regional leadership in order to block Western, especially US, influence in the region. Moscow will support even the non-democratic governments in the CARs if they are aligned with its interests. It does not want repetition of incidents like the 'colour revolutions' and the Andijon incident of 2005.<sup>5</sup> Such incidents have led to the strengthening of regional security measures especially under the umbrella of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Central Asian states are both sceptical of and receptive towards Moscow. They know that without Russian support, they cannot handle their security issues. At the same time, they want minimum Russian involvement in their internal affairs. Therefore, arrangements like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) can prove instrumental in enhancing intra-CARs security apparatus. The CSTO was established in May 2002. A major purpose of this organization was to improve collective security measures in the region. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan joined the security organization during its inaugural session, while Uzbekistan preferred to opt itself out due to various reasons. Primarily it appeared shy of the growing perception of Russian dominance in the region. Additionally, it disliked the perceived 'negative' role of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) during the events of 1999 and 2000 when IMU tried to make incursions into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

However, after the Andijon incident of May 2005, Tashkent formally joined the CSTO in 2006. It was a tactical move primarily aimed at countering Western pressure on Tashkent to hold an international inquiry into the Andijon massacre and other human rights violations inside Uzbekistan.

Under pressure, the Uzbek administration asked the US to vacate the Karshi-Khanabad airbase in protest against Washington's aggressive human rights policy towards Uzbekistan. Russia and other neighbouring states declared the decision brave and just. Not only the policy-makers but also the academics in Russia supported and lauded Uzbek President Islam Karimov's decision. A Russian academic Migrayan stated, "It was in Uzbekistan that, for the first time in the post-Soviet world, Colored Revolutions received a short, sharp shock."<sup>6</sup> The CSTO declared that Andijon incident was an internal matter of Uzbekistan, therefore, demand for an international inquiry was unjust and unacceptable. Eventually, Uzbekistan succeeded in getting official Russian support on Andijon crisis when Russia declared that it was an internal issue of Uzbekistan which should be resolved according to the Uzbek laws.<sup>7</sup>

Later, Tashkent got further close to Moscow, leading to signing of a treaty between the two countries in November 2005. Even before the Andijon massacre, the two governments had concluded an agreement on strategic

partnership in June 2004, which gave them rights to use the military facilities of each other.<sup>8</sup> In an interview to a Russian newspaper in January 2005, Karimov stated, “The partnership with Russia brings us, our people, and our countries, which are bound with thousands of ties, millions of human factors, closer.”<sup>9</sup>

Even after rejoining it in 2006, however, Uzbekistan never participated in any military exercises under the banner of the CSTO. According to Uzbek political analyst Farkhad Tolipov, “This is stipulated by the Uzbek legislation which prescribes a non-bloc or out-of-bloc foreign policy.”<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, it has been argued that Uzbekistan pursues a policy which makes it a dominant power in the Central Asian region.<sup>11</sup> By keeping itself outside of the military circle of the CSTO or any other Russian military apparatus, Tashkent wanted to contain Russian influence in the region. In June 2012, Uzbekistan once again quit its membership of the CSTO<sup>12</sup> and got inclined towards Beijing. Since the SCO is successful in resolving quite a few regional issues, especially the border disputes between China and rest of the SCO members, Tashkent considers it a good platform for resolving the water crisis in Central Asia.

Despite its recent slant towards Beijing, Tashkent knows the importance of Moscow as well. It cannot risk jeopardizing the interests of Russia in Uzbekistan. Russian support in containment of extremism and terrorism is a must for the CARs. Karimov once declared, “We have centuries-old relationship of friendship, brotherhood, and mutual assistance with that country [Russia] and its great people.”<sup>13</sup> During a visit to Moscow in April 2013, Karimov stated, “Next year’s planned exit of NATO troops from Afghanistan will create dangerous conditions in Central Asia, and Russia’s presence will help maintain peace in the region.”<sup>14</sup>

Tajikistan is heavily dependent on Moscow for its internal as well as external security. Russian military support during the Tajik civil war illustrates this dependence. Tajikistan has limited options of military and security cooperation with international as well as regional powers. Having historical and cultural ties with Iran, Dushanbe expected Tehran to support it militarily. However, due to international political conditions in which Tehran had been facing economic sanctions, Iran could not offer any substantial help to Dushanbe. Chinese non-interference policy towards Central Asia has restricted Chinese-Tajik military cooperation as well.

At the same time, Dushanbe has had tense relations with Tashkent, despite its dependence on the former, especially for its energy needs. It is generally argued that the main reason for these stressed relations was the incident during early 2000s when Uzbek Islamic extremists fled to Tajikistan during the Tajik civil war and tried to export their own extremist version of Islam. Hence it is argued that the only option left for Tajikistan is Russia.

Security cooperation between Dushanbe and Moscow is quite strong. On 5 October 2012, the military base lease deal between Russia and Tajikistan not only allowed Moscow to station its 7,000 troops in Tajikistan up to 2043 but also exempted these personnel and their families from any possible legal prosecution.<sup>15</sup> It was a point of concern not only for the Tajik human rights activists and civil society but also for the common citizens who are prosecuted

for minor crimes. It is worth mentioning that before this deal was signed, Moscow signalled to put restrictions on the Tajik migrant workers in Russia who contribute about forty per cent to the Tajik GDP. After the deal was signed, however, Moscow declared that Tajik migrant workers would get better treatment in Russia and their permits would be increased from one to three years. Besides concessions to the Tajik workers in Russia, Moscow also promised to give \$5 million to Dushanbe as an investment in energy sector and to counter narcotics trafficking in Tajikistan.<sup>16</sup>

Tajik border with Afghanistan is guarded by the CIS troops. During the Tajik civil war of 1992-97,<sup>17</sup> Russia along with Uzbekistan targeted Islamist militants' hideouts through airstrikes. Supply of drugs to Russia from Afghanistan through Tajikistan is another area of concern for Russia. Russian troops regularly patrol the Tajik-Afghan border along with Tajik troops in order to control infiltration of militants, drugs, and arms.

Kyrgyzstan is another state of the region which is unable to pull out of Moscow's influence. Despite two 'democratic revolutions' of 2005 and 2010, Kyrgyzstan still looks towards Russia for military and economic assistance. Kyrgyzstan has a unique position in Central Asian politics. It has military bases of both Russia and the US and has very good relations (economic as well as political) with China. Despite this unique and important position, however, Bishkek still relies on Moscow for its security. The SCO demanded US withdrawal from the Manas base in Kyrgyzstan in 2005. It became possible for the SCO to demand it only after the Andijon crisis in Uzbekistan and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005. After the 2010 ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan, Moscow wished to establish a military base under the CSTO umbrella near Osh, which was severely criticized by Tashkent on account that it would provide support to the ethnic Kyrgyz in south Kyrgyzstan against a substantial population of ethnic Uzbeks<sup>18</sup> who are deemed as an asset by Tashkent to exert pressure on Bishkek.

In order to get rid of the Manas base of the US forces, Moscow pledged a \$2 billion aid package to Bishkek in early 2009. Similarly, in order to have influence on the newly established government after the 2010 revolution, Russia promised \$50 million to Kyrgyzstan as aid.<sup>19</sup> Washington, however, managed to extend a deal with Bishkek for the use of the Manas base for a few more years. In order to keep a balance, Kyrgyz government succeeded in reaching a deal with Russia to extend its stay at Kant. The latest Russian-Kyrgyz deal regarding the basing rights to Russia in Kant was signed in September 2012, which extended Russian stay there for further 20 years.<sup>20</sup> It is said that in return Moscow agreed to invest in the construction of Kambarata-1, a hydro-electric power project, and to write off a debt of about \$500 million.<sup>21</sup>

Kazakhstan is the largest importer of Russian military equipment. Its military cooperation with Russia is stronger than any other state in the world.<sup>22</sup> A major reason for this cooperation is the substantial ethnic Russian population in Kazakhstan. Moreover, Baikonur space station that is used by Russia is also located in Kazakhstan. In order to have close contacts with Russia, the capital of Kazakhstan was shifted to Astana in the north from Almaty in the south.

Major areas of concern for the CSTO are “border security, developing rapid reaction and peacekeeping capabilities, reforming its legal mechanisms to act across a wider range of mission types and promoting its image as a genuinely strong political-military alliance.”<sup>23</sup> The most important security-related measure of the CSTO is the creation of the Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF) which was established in June 2009. Major purpose of the CRRF is to counter any internal threat to the stability of any member state, if requested by the concerned state. It is feared that this force will be used against any possible political or religious opposition, or insurgency. According to Abduljalil Boymatov, President of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (HRSU), “Most of the security measures taken by the Central Asian governments in general and Uzbekistan in particular to deal with the internal ‘crisis’ are fake and are to counter the opposition, both religious and secular.”<sup>24</sup>

The CSTO is authorized to help its member states when they face internal crises. The organization is a strong tool for the regimes in the CARs to legitimize their prolonged rules. The CSTO is like a shield for these regimes against international criticism. But it is not a success story because it lacks mechanisms to carry out its operations, and has to cope with divergent and sometimes contradictory interest of the member states.

Russia wants to enhance the role of the CSTO for regional security especially in the wake of the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) under the umbrella of the SCO. During the May 2012 summit of the CSTO, Russian President Vladimir Putin urged an enhanced role of the organization for regional security.<sup>25</sup>

### **The US and the hydrocarbons of Central Asia**

Western support to the ‘colour revolutions’ in former Soviet republics brought a new era of distrust between Washington and Central Asian capitals. It also brought regional states closer to Moscow and Beijing especially under the umbrella of the SCO. The Andijon crisis annoyed the US administration to such an extent that it started demanding independent international inquiry into the civilian killings at the hands of the Uzbek security forces. This demand was rejected by the Karimov administration. Some of the Uzbek newspapers blamed Washington for the political instability in the region. Obviously, they were referring to the ‘colour revolutions’. The Andijon incident sparked so much distrust between Tashkent and Washington that the Uzbek authorities not only asked the US to vacate the Karshi-Khanabad base but also sacked or transferred many of the pro-US officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence.<sup>26</sup>

Initially, the US was more concerned with nuclear stockpiles and wastes in the Central Asia region left after Soviet disintegration. During the first decade of independence, the US extended little economic support to the Central Asian states. From 1992 to 2002, the US provided the whole region with merely \$3 billion in economic assistance.<sup>27</sup> Limited and slow help was provided for the civil society strengthening. However, during 1994-95, Washington got interested in the hydrocarbons of the region and started to chart out a strategy to

diversify the transportation routes of these hydrocarbons to international markets. The US policymakers realized the importance of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan as potential leaders of the region due to their political and economic strength respectively.

Former assistant secretary of state for Central Asia Elizabeth Jones told Senate sub-committee on Central Asia on 13 December 2001 that the US wanted to see a prosperous, stable, and peaceful region which had accelerated in economic and democratic reforms, and in civil society and human rights respects. She added that the US wanted to see the region integrated into global markets and society as well.<sup>28</sup>

While engaging with the US after 9/11, Tashkent was confident about huge inflows of dollars in the form of 'economic and political aid'.<sup>29</sup> It also expected that the US will help it to organize and update the Uzbek military on modern lines. It was disappointed, however, when the US shifted its attention towards Iraq in 2003. At the same time, the US authorities were not satisfied with improvement in human rights conditions in Uzbekistan. When Andijon crisis erupted in 2005, bilateral relations between the US and Uzbekistan reached to a point that the US had to vacate the bases in Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan signed a strategic partnership deal with the US in 2002, which focused more or less on Iran than any other potential threat to the US interests in Central Asia. However, this deal provided Tashkent a unique opportunity not only to curb its internal opposition (both secular and religious) but also to pressurize its neighbours like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to follow the Uzbek regional line. Through this strategic partnership, Tashkent eyed to pressurize Dushanbe in order to dissuade the latter from challenging its regional authority. Since Dushanbe and Tehran have very good relations, the US does not want any Iranian influence in other Central Asian states.

Washington's relationship with Tashkent cooled down after the Andijon crisis of 2005, but the creation of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) for supply to the NATO troops based in Afghanistan brought Tashkent back into the limelight of the US Central Asian policy. A Pentagon official said that the time to criticize the Uzbek leadership for Andijon massacre had passed. "It's gone, get over it," he said.<sup>30</sup> In order to get the NDN routes, Washington lowered its tone against human rights violations by Central Asian regimes. Moreover, it also increased military supplies to Uzbekistan.<sup>31</sup>

Kazakhstan intends to become the commercial hub of the region. Having hydrocarbon resources in abundance, President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev has rightly calculated the strength of his country. He renegotiated the oil and gas contracts with the Western companies. The new contracts gave Kazakhstan higher revenues on the export of hydrocarbons.<sup>32</sup> While renegotiating the contracts Nazarbayev stated, "What you are doing is not enough. We were asking for increased participation. This is a subject of more discussions and we will see together what is good for Kazakhstan and for you."<sup>33</sup>

Central Asian leaders are also fearful of the free market economy. All of them, except Kyrgyzstan, favour gradual and slow market reforms.

Nazarbayev thinks that revolutionizing the economy will not only slow down the growth rate and economic activities but will also bring disaster to the Central Asian economies. The US has supported Kazakh initiatives to open up its economy to the international market.

Washington provided Dushanbe with a clean chit on human rights violations after 9/11. It declared that Tajikistan had not harboured any international terrorists and was extremely critical of the Taliban regime. US aid to Tajikistan increased from merely \$12 million in 2000 to a substantial \$50 million in 2007.

It is very easy for the West to broker energy deals with the authoritative regimes than democratic ones though. "When the 2002 fraudulent presidential referendum extended the presidential term for the next couple of years in Uzbekistan, the US announced to increase the military aid to Tashkent three times, according to news reports."<sup>34</sup> Another area of concern for the US is terrorism. American political analyst Ariel Cohen stated, "Hizb [ut Tahrir] may launch terrorist attacks against U.S. targets and allies, operating either alone or in cooperation with other global terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda. A Hizb takeover of any Central Asian state could provide the global radical Islamist movement with a geographic base and access to the expertise and technology to manufacture weapons of mass destruction."<sup>35</sup>

Under the umbrella of the Central Asia Counter-narcotics Initiative (CACI), a \$4.1 million initiative to combat drug trafficking in the region, the US wants to establish its centres in all the Central Asian states. However, both Russia and China suspect this move as the deployment of semi-military US forces in the region.<sup>36</sup>

## **China and the SCO**

Although China claims to have a non-military policy towards Central Asia, it has signed some security agreements with Central Asian states. Beijing and Bishkek have agreed on increased cooperation in the field of security. China is investing in several developmental projects of Central Asia. It pays special attention to the transport infrastructure development besides importing energy from the region. Beijing is eager to construct a railway line from China to Uzbekistan through Kyrgyzstan, which would connect China not only to the Central Asian region but to Russia and Europe as well. The proposed railway line could be extended to Afghanistan and Pakistan too. China is also involved in the construction of Dalka-Kemin transmission line to import electricity from Kyrgyzstan.<sup>37</sup>

China has some bilateral and multilateral security arrangements with Central Asian states. Kazakhstan, for example, has close security relations with China. China has provided Kazakhstan with military equipment, besides training the Kazakh security forces. Both the states have also conducted joint exercises along with collaboration against drugs and arms smuggling.<sup>38</sup>

China has heavy investments in Central Asian states. It is the largest source of imports for Kazakhstan.<sup>39</sup> Keeping in view the presence of a large ethnic Russian population in Kazakhstan and its close ties with Moscow,



increased trade with Kazakhstan is the success of Chinese interests in Central Asia. Since 2002, China has been actively pursuing the creation of a free trade zone among SCO member countries, but the rest of the members have reservations about it. At the same time, Beijing has developed strong bilateral economic relationship with the CARs.

China's trade volume with Central Asia has grown from a mere \$465 million in 1992 to \$7.7 billion in 2004 and \$29 billion in 2010. In comparison, Russia's trade volume with Central Asia in 2010 was \$22 billion, which depicts the ever-growing Chinese trade relations with the Central Asian region.<sup>40</sup> China has also constructed oil and gas pipelines from Central Asia to Xinjiang. In 2009, Atasu-Alashankou oil pipeline was completed, which is 962 km long.

The SCO is one of the most important regional security organizations, which aims to combat 'extremism, terrorism, and separatism' in the member states. Most of the separatist movements are linked to 'Islamic fundamentalism' by the SCO regimes.<sup>41</sup> Joint military exercises under the SCO have been conducted several times. Such exercises not only involve regular troops of the member states but also paramilitary troops and intelligence agencies. The largest of such exercises was conducted during 2005.<sup>42</sup> Uzbekistan remains outside of this military exercises network though. It just sends observers or a "few participants from the security services instead of regular armies."<sup>43</sup> Karimov regime is very careful towards every regional security organization and uses the SCO to resolve its energy-related issues and combat extremism and terrorism in the region, which are the most important problems for Uzbekistan.

In order to keep the populations of the member states away from the political and democratic developments at the international level and to keep the terrorist and extremist activities under check, the SCO has introduced strict internet surveillance. Most of the internet IPs in Central Asia have been provided by Russia and China.

The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) with its headquarters in Tashkent works under the umbrella of the SCO. The RATS was established in June 2004 to ensure exchange of all kinds of information amongst the member states to combat the three evils of extremism, terrorism, and separatism. It works as the advisory body to ensure regional security. The RATS is concerned mainly with correspondence among the member states besides the advisory role. It does not participate in any kind of operational activism. As an advisory unit, it is involved in the conduct of different seminars, workshops etc. for the exchange of ideas and experiences.

The RATS operates on the basis of the member states' contributions. Most of these contributions come from Beijing and Moscow. During recent years, however, Astana has also contributed a substantial portion of the SCO finances.<sup>44</sup> Combating drug trafficking is also high on the agenda of the RATS. "Drug trafficking is always a matter of concern for the SCO. It has not only plagued the Central Asian states but Russia and Europe as well, and the SCO wants to play its role to control this menace."<sup>45</sup> During the June 2009 SCO summit, China announced to create a fund of worth \$10 billion for the SCO members.<sup>46</sup>

Despite its successes in different fields, the SCO still faces divergent interests and stances on several core issues like “the nature of terrorist threats and their causes, diverging national definitions of terrorism, and national governments eager to maintain freedom of action in this sphere and limit encroachment on their national sovereignty.”<sup>47</sup> Similarly, cooperation between the CSTO and the SCO (all Central Asian states except Turkmenistan are members of both these security organizations) in this regard is almost non-existent.

China wants Russia to neutralize the US military and security influence in the region, which is necessary to achieve Chinese economic interest in the region. The draw-down of US forces in Afghanistan has brought new opportunities as well as challenges for the regional states. China and Russia being the major regional powers could be looking forward to and would have charted out their strategies for it. However, China would be having an upper hand in the region because it has invested a lot in the regional markets and economies, while Russia has been unable to secure the region militarily. This inability was seen during the Tajik civil war of 1992-1997. Similarly, Russian inability to resolve internal disputes of the Central Asian states, which are the legacy of former Soviet Union, has provided China leverage over Moscow in Central Asia.

Successful resolution of border disputes with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and its non-involvement in regional politics has provided China a good opportunity to expand its soft influence in Central Asia. Former deputy secretary general of the SCO Mirzasharif Jalalov says, “It is not the mandate of the SCO to use force in the internal conflicts of the member states. However, as the charter of the organization states, it will carry out military actions against the forces which are a threat to the existing regimes.”<sup>48</sup> The statement clearly indicates how the SCO is used to counter opposition forces in the member states. This statement illustrates that authoritarianism will continue in the region for some time.

## **Analysis**

Despite the regional cooperation mechanisms, differences among regional states have not been resolved completely. In fact, none of the regional cooperation mechanisms has been successful in Central Asia. The most important reason for this failure is lack of political will. Border disputes between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and so on have yet to be resolved. The fragile relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan due to water distribution issues are a major cause of the inability of regional organizations to work effectively. The under-construction Rogun Hydropower station is a major bone of contention between Tashkent and Dushanbe. Uzbekistan is also highly critical of the Central Asia-South Asia 1000 (CASA-1,000) project which will provide 1,000 megawatts of electricity to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Uzbekistan has always been critical of the pro-Moscow Kazakh policy, especially at times when Tashkent has closer relations with Washington.

Tashkent is also critical of Astana's relatively liberal economic policies. Nevertheless, in the field of anti-terrorism, both states have supported each other most of the times. This support was evident after the Andijon crisis of 2005, when Kazakh government extradited several 'wanted' extremists to Uzbekistan.

The opposition political parties of Central Asian states are critical of the SCO and CSTO for their negligence of human rights issues. For example, the Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan (SDPT) is quite critical of the election observers of these organizations. The SDPT argues that their electoral reports contradict a lot of those of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). According to Rakhmatillah Zairov, head of the SDPT, "they do not observe the elections, but spend their time being wined and dined by representatives of governmental structures."<sup>49</sup> This allegation has sound grounds, as both these organizations have always supported authoritarian rulers of Central Asia. For example, after the Andijon incident of 2005, the CSTO and SCO supported Karimov's stance and strictly opposed international inquiry demand.

The SCO summit of July 2005 declared that every region and every state had its own parameters of human rights and civil liberties which could be different from other societies. Therefore, others must respect the social values and sovereign equality of the other nations.<sup>50</sup> This was a clear message to the international community as well as those states which were critical of human rights violations not only by the Uzbek regime but also other CIS and SCO member states. The 2005 SCO summit also demanded a timeframe from the US to withdraw its forces from the Manas airbase. These complex intra-regional political and economic issues have provided the non-Central Asian powers an opportunity to penetrate this region with positive and negative impacts on the region.

The US involvement has brought substantial investment into the region especially in the hydrocarbon sector and in the form of foreign aid. This investment has helped Central Asian regimes in improving physical infrastructure within the region.<sup>51</sup> Since Russia is unable to compete with the US in the region because the costs are much more than Moscow can afford, it has strengthened its relationship with China in order to exert pressure on Central Asian regimes to have a balanced relationship with them as well as the US. Russia supported the US-led war on terrorism and cooperated with Washington in this regard. Russian support to the US-led war on terrorism helped it to carry out operations in Chechnya, which could have faced criticism otherwise. US presence, according to Moscow, is helpful in eliminating or at least weakening the militant groups and bringing stability to the region, which is ultimately beneficial for Moscow.

On the other hand, competing interests of regional and global actors involved in Central Asia has further pushed the region against the wall. The new great game has confused the regional leadership. It has, however, strengthened the autocratic and authoritative Central Asian regimes. The 'national interests' of the powers involved in the region has forced some major powers to close their eyes on human rights conditions. According to Stephen Blank, "Central Asia has

become a cockpit not only of terrorism and of a renewed great game, but also of ideological contestations.”<sup>52</sup> Frederick Starr describes the new great game in the following words:

“As U.S. and European pressure increased in the area of democratization and human rights, both Russia and China were able to dangle before Tashkent alliances based on a less rigorous standard in these areas, yet promising greater rewards than were forthcoming from Washington. Both were pursuing long-term strategic objectives, which they could present as less threatening to Tashkent than the U.S.’ preoccupations.”<sup>53</sup>

The SCO seems to be the best option for the CARs in the current scenario. It has given them more chances to chart out a relatively independent policy because both China and Russia are powerful members of the organization, which neutralizes any effort by one of them to influence the region. Although Russia and China have different kinds of interests in the region, i.e., geo-political and geo-economic respectively, all the members of the SCO follow the agenda of countering ‘extremism, terrorism, and separatism’. At the same time, since the SCO, according to Roy Allison, is a “pro-status quo authoritarian club,”<sup>54</sup> it is in the interest of the authoritarian leaderships of the CARs to stick tightly to this club in order to prolong their personal rules.

The SCO states are least interested in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) due to fear of Islamic influences in their respective states and societies. Moreover, they have cordial relations with Israel and are reluctant to support declarations from the forum of the OIC condemning Israeli actions against the Palestinians. Since the Central Asian regimes do not want any pressure on their political systems, they are more open towards regional organizations, which support the political status quo in Central Asia (like the CIS and the SCO). On the other hand, they are critical of the regional organizations that support or promote liberal democratic states (like the OSCE).

China wants to use the SCO for political and security objectives, while Uzbekistan intends to use it to balance the pressure coming from Moscow besides gaining advantages with respect to the water distribution crisis. On the other hand, Kazakhstan is more interested in the SCO’s economic aspect. Since Astana wants to promote its hydrocarbon exports and industry, it always supports the economic initiatives taken by China and Russia to promote regional trade. Expansion of regional trade will also provide Kazakhstan with the opportunity to act as a link between China and Russia.

Despite these divergent approaches within the SCO, most of the Central Asian regimes support the organization<sup>55</sup> as it provides a forum for China and Russia to resolve their political and economic differences peacefully, which is necessary for the CARs to fulfil their interests as well as to come out of Moscow’s influence. China is least threatened by the deployment of Russian military in the CARs for maintenance of peace and stability. In fact, it has given Beijing an opportunity to advance its trade objectives in the region. This

deployment also helps China in eradicating the possible sanctuaries of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in Central Asia.

The Central Asian states are 'confused' regarding the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. They want the US forces to remain in Afghanistan for a longer period because their continued deployment will provide security assurance to the Central Asian regimes against terrorist infiltration from the latter, especially into Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Moreover, the US military presence in Afghanistan keeps the militants engaged beyond the Central Asian borders. However, the regional security apparatus has failed so far in bringing stability to the region.

All the three major actors involved in the region, i.e., China, Russia, and the US, are suspicious of each other. Cooperation between two is deemed as a step against the third power's interests in the region. This suspicion has led to the failure of any effective regional cooperation mechanism. China has been very successful so far in achieving its economic designs in Central Asia though.

Besides these three major actors, regional actors like India and Pakistan are very important. Although India has an upper hand on Pakistan with regard to Central Asian states because of its historical ties with the region, Pakistan is important for Central Asian trade and energy exports. New Delhi has invested considerably in Central Asian economies especially in the pharmaceutical industry. It has concluded deals with the CARs in energy sector as well. It is important to note that about 80 per cent of the energy consumed in India is imported. Therefore, Central Asia is extremely important for New Delhi in order to fulfil its energy needs. India and Uzbekistan struck an MoU in 2006, which declared, "Extracts from Uzbek oil and gas reserves would be split equally between the two countries."<sup>56</sup> But India does not share a border with CARs. It has to pass through Afghanistan and Pakistan to reach Central Asia. India joined the proposed Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India Pipeline (TAPI) project but is not keen now. Pakistan has similar problems in accessing Central Asia. It has to pass through war-torn and unstable Afghanistan in order to reach the CARs.

Besides energy interests, India has some political objectives in its foreign policy regarding Central Asia which, according to Raj Chhikara, include, "Growth as a regional power, permanent membership of the UN Security Council and counteracting adverse Pakistani propaganda."<sup>57</sup> Another prominent Indian expert on Central Asia Meena Singh Roy suggests that New Delhi should not get involved in the military game going on in the region; instead its major focus should be on trade and economic cooperation.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

The complex geo-political, economic, and security situation of Central Asia has increased its importance not only for regional but global powers as well. Western plans to construct alternative oil pipelines (westwards) bypassing Russia have serious constraints. The alternative pipelines will have to cross the Caspian Sea in order to bypass Russia and of course Iran. Even if trans-Caspian pipelines are constructed, their operational cost would be much higher than the

existing ones. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline is operational but its cost is very high. The Western proposed TAPI is also in doldrums as security situation in Afghanistan is not conducive. The Iran-West nuclear deal may give the West a chance to import Central Asian hydrocarbons through Iran, but it is pre-mature to discuss the route at this stage.

China on the other hand is quite successful in its policy towards Central Asia. It has not only constructed oil and gas pipelines from Caspian to Xinjiang but has also invested heavily in the Central Asian economy. It has constructed transport infrastructure in the form of roads and tunnels, especially in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. It has also resolved its border disputes with Central Asian states as well as Russia. From the forum of the SCO, Beijing seems to be the future leader of the Central Asian region.

Russia, despite facing economic hardships, still possesses substantial influence in the region. Dependence on Russia to export their energy reserves to international markets and old socialist connectivity have given Moscow an edge over all other competing orders in Central Asia. Russia is very much involved in the security apparatus of the CARs in the form of the CSTO. It has military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and a space station in Kazakhstan. A large ethnic Russian population also lives in Central Asia. All these factors force Russia to be very active in the region and encourage it to counter moves by any regional or global player that could hamper Russian interests in the region.

All the major powers have divergent interests in the region and none wants others to challenge its interest. The tussle to secure energy and geo-strategic needs between China, Russia, and the US has brought a new kind of rivalry in the region where they cooperate with and contradict each other at the same time. Their cooperation in the field of countering terrorism, drug trafficking, and arms smuggling has been impressive. Through bilateral and multilateral agreements, all these states have worked hard to overcome these challenges.

From the forums of the SCO, CSTO, and NATO's Partner for Peace Programme or NATO-PFP, regional states are cooperating and assisting the major powers in combating terrorism. The SCO unconditionally supported Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan in order to counter terrorism in the region. However, Beijing and Moscow did have certain reservations regarding the NDN. There had also been certain voices within the region for US withdrawal, but the emergence of Islamic State (IS) and its increased recruitment from Central Asian states forced regional security pundits to re-think about US withdrawal from the region.

The potential strength of IS in Afghanistan forced these powers to start a process of negotiations with the Taliban. The US is proactive in this regard while Russia and China have also supported the move. Tri-nation cooperation against militants and terrorists will last long because China and Russia will try to use any means to crush militancy and separatism in Xinjiang and the Caucasus. The US cannot afford a possible spillover of IS in the rest of world either. Therefore, despite having differences and playing the New Great Game,

regional and global powers would remain engaged in partnership and cooperation against terrorism and extremism.

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