

India and the New Great Game in Central Asia

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Abstract

The phrase "Great Game" is commonly ascribed to the contest for imperial dominance in Central Asia. The focus of the Anglo-Russian rivalry during the 19th century was the strategic competition known as the "Great Game" in Central Asia. Following Russian expansion and territorial annexation of Central Asia, the Czarist Russian Empire wanted to penetrate into Afghanistan. The British controlled Balochistan areas of Pakistan so as to get easy access to the warm waters of Arabian Sea. That led to the outbreak of the Anglo-Russian 'Great Game' which settled on recognising Afghanistan as a buffer between Czarist and British Empires. Reconnecting Central and South Asia is a challenge and is also an opportunity because India as a core regional power has age-old ambitions to deepen its influence in what was called as 'Turkestan.' This paper will dwell at length on the role of India's policy oriented think tanks, research centers and universities in reaching out to Central Asia and how the assumption of power by the Taliban in Kabul in August 2021 tends to shape New Delhi's grand strategy and designs in Central Asia. The paper will also examine how Central Asia formulates India's strategic thought process and to what extent China and India are competitors in that region on pragmatic grounds.

Keywords: Great Game, Central Asia, Modi, Extremism, Terrorism, SCO, TAPI, CASA

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Introduction

Three Anglo-Afghan wars (1839-1842, 1878-1880, 1919) settled borders between British India and Afghanistan with the Wakhan Corridor as a buffer between Russian and British Empires. Central Asia, which before Russian expansion, was connected with the Indian Subcontinent for centuries, lost its linkages with its neighbourhood. The Soviet and Chinese occupation of greater Central Asia on the one hand and the consolidation of British rule in India made it difficult for the people of the two regions to freely interact with each other. That was the price which the people of Central Asia and the subcontinent had to pay for the 'Great Game' between the Russian and the British empires. The gradual mitigation of connectivity between the Soviet Union, China, Central Asia and British India, the age-old cultural, religious and trade ties between the two regions were ruptured.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the geopolitical dynamics in Central Asia witnessed the inclusion of two additional actors, namely China and the United States, in what is sometimes referred to as the "Great Game." Currently, India, being the fifth largest economy globally, seeks to enhance its presence in the oil and gas abundant region of Central Asia. However, India's aspirations face a challenge due to a perceived obstruction by Pakistan, since New Delhi feels that Islamabad is impeding India's access to Central Asia. The visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to all the Central Asian states in 2015 was widely regarded as a significant step in strengthening the relationship between New Delhi and Central Asia, as well as fostering closer connections between the two regions.

Reconnecting Central and South Asia is a challenge and is also an opportunity because India as a core regional power has age-old ambitions to deepen its influence in what was called as 'Turkestan.'¹ Following the

¹ With the advancement of the policy of 'Russification' a major part of Central Asia was called as Russian Turkestan and with the Chinese absorption of the remaining part of it was called as the Chinese Turkestan.

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dissolution of the Soviet Union, a number of new Central Asian republics emerged, and the term ‘Great Game’ got a new impetus. India as a close Soviet friend has certainly an edge vis-à-vis Pakistan as far as Central Asia is concerned. Sharing perceptions of Central Asian states on combating extremism, separatism and terrorism, India made use of its clout in strengthening understanding to deal with the aforementioned threats. One can question the credentials of Modi’s regime on secularism, but the secular mode of governance of Central Asian regimes is also termed as a plus point in Indo-Central Asian ties.

This study aims to analyse the dynamics of India and the emerging geopolitical competition in Central Asia, sometimes referred to as the "new Great Game." The analysis will primarily revolve around four key themes:

1. India’s strategic, economic and political interests.
2. India’s grand strategy.
3. Pakistan as a factor in India’s age-old design.
4. Facilitation of India’s role in Central Asia by Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

Furthermore, the paper will dwell at length on the role of India’s policy oriented think tanks, research centers and universities in reaching out to Central Asia and how the assumption of power by the Taliban in Kabul in August 2021, tends to shape New Delhi’s grand strategy and designs in Central Asia. The paper will also examine how Central Asia formulates India’s strategic thought process and to what extent China and India are competitors in that region on pragmatic grounds.

The Centrality of Great Game

The term "Great Game"² pertains to the historical competition that took place between Tsarist Russia and the British Empire in the regions of the

² Peter Hopkirk, “The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia,” (New York: Kodansha America Inc, 1992). p. xv.

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Indian Subcontinent and Central Asia. It was initially coined by Arthur Connolly, an officer of the East India Company. However, it gained widespread recognition through its inclusion in Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim*, which was published in 1901. During this particular era, British officials harboured apprehension and preoccupation with the expanding influence of Tsarist Russia in the Khanates of Central Asia. They perceived this development as potentially detrimental to British interests in the Indian Subcontinent.³

The term primarily denotes a conflict between two or more nations, when the objective is to establish dominance over other nations within a specific geographical area. During the 19th and 20th centuries, Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent served as a significant arena for power struggles between the British and Tsarist Russian empires. Afghanistan, in particular, played a crucial role as a buffer state, preventing direct conflict between these two powers.

In addition, the commencement of the significant game occurred on January 12, 1830, when Lord Ellenborough, the esteemed President of the Board of Control of India, issued a directive to Lord William Bentinck, the distinguished Governor General, to initiate the establishment of a novel commerce pathway to the Emirate of Bukhara. The British government formulated a strategic plan to establish dominion over the Emirate of Afghanistan, with the intention of transforming it into a protectorate. Additionally, they sought to utilise the Ottoman Empire, the Persian Empire, the Khanate of Khiva, and the Emirate of Bukhara as intermediary nations, positioned strategically to serve as buffers between the British and Afghan empires. The implementation of this measure will serve to safeguard India, as well as strategically significant maritime trade routes against potential threats emanating from Russia. In contrast, Russia put out the proposition of designating Afghanistan as a neutral zone. As a

³ Nargis Jan, "The Role of India in new great game of Central Asia," *International Journal of Science and Research*, Volume 11 Issue 1, January 2022, p. 260.

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consequence, Russia successfully annexed Khiva, Bukhara, and Kokand.⁴ Hence, scholars in the field of history have seen the culmination of the Great Game as transpiring on September 10, 1895, marked by the formalisation of the Pamir Boundary Commission protocols. This significant event entailed the establishment of a defined border between Afghanistan and the Russian empire. Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim*, published in 1901, significantly popularised the word and provided novel implications of rivalry among major powers. The popularity experienced a notable increase following the commencement of the Soviet-Afghan war in 1979.⁵

According to Peter Hopkirk, the Russo-British contest for dominance in Central Asia escalated as the distance between their respective front lines gradually diminished, leading to an intensification of the Great Game. Notwithstanding the inherent hazards, primarily arising from confrontations with antagonistic tribes and rulers, a notable absence of intrepid young military personnel willing to jeopardise their lives outside the territorial boundaries was not observed. These individuals had shown a fervent enthusiasm to venture into uncharted territories, meticulously documenting Russian military activities, and endeavouring to secure the loyalty of sceptical Khans.⁶ In his literary work titled "The Great Game," the author presented additional arguments. The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia attracted not just professionals engaged in the Great Game, but also a multitude of amateur strategists who avidly observed the events from the periphery. These individuals offered their opinion extensively through a plethora of books, articles, impassioned pamphlets, and letters to the Press. The majority of these commentators and critics held very hawkish views and were mostly pro-Russia. The authors contended that the sole means of halting the progression of the Russian forces was through the implementation of proactive strategies. This entailed achieving a position of advantage, either through military invasion or by

⁴ Nargis Jan, "The Role of India in new great game of Central Asia."

⁵ Muzalevsky, R. "Unlocking India's Strategic Potential in Central Asia," *Army War College Carlisle Barracks PA Strategic Studies Institute*, (2015), pp. 17-30.

⁶ Peter Hopkirk, *Op.cit*, pp. 4-5.

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establishing cooperative buffer states or satellites, strategically positioned along the anticipated invasion routes.⁷

The Great Game: Entering South Asia

The culmination of the geopolitical rivalry between the Russian and the British empires in the 19th century was marked by the acknowledgment of Afghanistan as a buffer state, effectively, reducing the risk of direct confrontation between the two powers. As a result, Afghanistan was designated as a buffer state following the signing of the Treaty of Gandamak on May 26, 1879. This agreement was reached between Amir Yaqub Khan, the ruler of Afghanistan, and the British. The treaty included provisions that imposed stringent conditions, such as relinquishing control over Afghanistan's foreign policy to London, consenting with the establishment of British missions in Kabul and other locations, and ceding certain territories near the Indian frontier, including the Khyber Pass, to Britain.⁸ In exchange for agreeing to the stringent terms outlined in the Treaty of Gandamak, the Afghan Emir was granted assurances of safeguarding against Russian interference and a recurring monthly payment amounting to 60,000 pounds. The enduring impact of the Great Game, with Afghanistan serving as a focal point of struggle, continues to reverberate throughout Central, South, and West Asia in the present day.

The Durand Line agreement was established in November 1893, marking the border between British India and Afghanistan. This agreement was negotiated between Sir Henry Mortimer Durand, the British Indian Foreign Secretary at the time, and Amir Abdur Rehman, the King of Afghanistan. The pact led to the declaration of Afghanistan as a buffer state positioned strategically between the Russian and British empires.⁹ The historical trajectory of modern Afghanistan is characterised by a unique and noteworthy pattern of being subjected to attack and occupation by three erstwhile significant global powers: the British, the Soviets, and

⁷ Peter Hopkirk, *Op.cit*, 5-6.

⁸ Peter Hopkirk, *Op.cit*, p. 385.

⁹ Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan A history of Struggle and Survival*, New York: I. B. Taurus, 2004, p. 28.

the Americans. This distinguishes Afghanistan from other nations in contemporary world history.

Post-Soviet Union

During the era following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the methods employed to attain influence in the 19th century and the present day exhibit notable disparities. In the former period, influence was predominantly established through military dominance over a specific territory. Conversely, contemporary strategies for gaining influence involve fostering economic integration with a region, thereby preventing other nations from utilising the said region in a manner that contradicts their own national interests. Currently, the nations engaged in a contest for regional dominance in Central Asia include the United States, Russia, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and the European Union.¹⁰ Unlike the 19th century Great Game which reflected conventional use of power and diplomacy, the new Great Game commencing after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the emergence of Central Asian states independent of Moscow, four major changes took place. First, the 19th century Great Game was primarily between the Russian and the British empires as the two powers wanted to expand and then contain each other. Second, the new Great Game following the emergence of new Central Asian states in 1991, also involves other powers namely the United States, Russia, China, India and Iran. Third, with the application of information technology, soft power and globalisation, connectivity gained momentum which gave a new dimension and impetus to competition and struggle for gaining influence in Central Asia. Finally, oil and gas rich Central Asia, unlike the 19th century Great Game, created new sources of attraction for existing players. New conflicts focusing on resources became an essential feature of the new Great Game.

In this particular situation, the emerging geopolitical competition in Central Asia is primarily driven by the pursuit of resource acquisition,

¹⁰ Sachdeva, G. (2006). "India's attitude towards China's growing influence in Central Asia and China," *Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol.4, No.3, (2015) pp.23-34.

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particularly in light of the prevailing energy crises in the region's vicinity. Pakistan has long held a historical aspiration to establish connectivity with Central Asia, although it encounters obstacles due to the prevailing circumstances in Afghanistan. The long-standing project known as the Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India (TAPI) gas pipeline aims to harness and transport natural gas resources from Turkmenistan to the South Asian region. Similarly, implementation of the "Central Asia-South Asia" (CASA) project, which aims to facilitate the transmission of energy from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to South Asia, has been hindered due to the ongoing fighting in Afghanistan.

Unlike the 19th century Great Game in the 21st century, the struggle for influence in Central Asia is based on conflict and cooperation. The old Great Game lacked technological connectivity whereas in present circumstances, the players in the Great Game are applying the tools of soft power like diplomacy, trade, aid and investments. China, as the world's second largest and India as the fifth largest economy, are mindful of strengthening their influence in Central Asia by pursuing cultural diplomacy and other forms of soft power. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its borders with Central Asia provide an edge as compared to India thus putting it in a disadvantageous position. Therefore, a new Great Game in Central Asia has begun. A number of players in the arena are trying to compete for the attention of 'five brides.' It is not enough to invoke the romance of old historical ties. If that be the case, Iran and Turkey could claim much closer historical, cultural and linguistic kinship with these states. Indian history does not take very kindly to the Central Asian conquerors, especially the Muslim invaders who marched through the rocky northwestern passes to rule her for centuries.¹¹ Romance with Central Asia tends to get a new impetus with the Soviet disintegration and the emergence of five independent states in that region leading to new

¹¹ Maqsoodul Hasan Nuri, "India and Central Asia," in Moonis Ahmar (ed.), *Contemporary Central Asia* (Department of International Relations, University of Karachi and Hanns Seidel Foundation, 1995), p. 196.

opportunities, competition and competition among players namely India, Pakistan and China.

India's Growing Role in Central Asia

Unlike Pakistan, India has an age-old connectivity and influence in Central Asia. Due to its close relationship with the then Soviet Union, India managed to make inroads in the Soviet Central Asian Republics by developing cultural, educational and economic ties.¹² With the emancipation of Central Asia from Moscow, India embarked on its policy to revitalise its ties with that region.¹³ Compatibility of perceptions between India and the newly-independent Central Asian states on secular mode of governance; resisting Islamic extremism, separatism and terrorism also made a difference for fomenting ties between the two.

A lot of policy oriented research in the Indian centers and institutes on Central Asia reflect New Delhi's serious approach on understanding a region, which since centuries had cultural, historical and trade linkages with South Asia. For instance, in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), which is India's premier federal seat of learning, there is a Center for Central Asian Studies, which not only specialises on contemporary Central Asia, but also offers languages and study of cultures of that region. In University of Kashmir, Srinagar, there is a Center of Central Asian Studies which was established in 1979, focusing on offering M. Phil/PhD programme on Central Asia, and holds academic conferences/seminars/workshops. It also works on interdisciplinary research projects connecting India and Central Asia. The Center also publishes the annual research journal *Central Asian Studies*. Furthermore, Institute for Defense Studies and Analysis (IDSA), based in New Delhi, is also involved in policy-oriented research on Central Asia. Under Manohar

¹² Moonis Ahmar, "India's role in the New Central Asia," *Pakistan Horizon* 45:3 (July 1992), pp.57-70.

¹³ Moonis Ahmar, "India's relations with the Central Asian States: Pakistan's Perspective," in Riazul Islam et.al (eds.), *Central Asia History, Politics and Culture* (Karachi: Institute of Central and West Asian Studies, 1999), pp. 135-158.

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Parrikar-IDSA series, a book entitled *Central Asia Key to Engaging Russia* written by Deepak Kumar was published.

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In the historical context, since the days of Delhi Sultanate to the demise of Mughal Empire, the Indo-Central Asian interaction was quite obvious and significant. However, with the imposition of British rule in the subcontinent, and the advancement of Russia in Central Asia to the borders of Afghanistan, that interaction began to diminish. The Indian leadership after gaining independence from the British in August 1947, gave attention to its ties with the USSR and its Central Asian Republics. An example of this is when Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, embarked on visits to Central Asia in 1956 and 1961. These visits facilitated an increase in engagement with the artists, scholars, vocalists, and scientists. India and Central Asia have a long-standing historical connection spanning over two millennia. The historical perspective reveals a substantial degree of connectedness and cultural contact between the Kushan Empire in ancient India and the Mughal Empire in medieval India. Cultural, artistic and educational traffic thrived between the two countries, especially with Uzbekistan, the most populated of the Central Asian Republics, priding itself on its rich cultural and Islamic heritage.¹⁴

Therefore, *“these Muslim Republics, which formed an integral part of the new defunct Soviet Union, saw India through the official prism of Moscow. India, was for instance, seen as a leading Third World country in the forefront of the Nonaligned Movement, active in world forums, a significant military and industrial power, and a close and steady economic and strategic ally of the Soviet Union. A large Muslim population which had shared historical memories hardened the image of India as a secular, liberal, democratic and progressively developing nation. Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru symbolised all that was noble, rich and progressive in Indian thought and philosophy.”*¹⁵

¹⁴ Maqsudul Hasan Nuri, “India and Central Asia” *Opcit.*

¹⁵ Maqsudul Hasan Nuri, “India and Central Asia.”

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Historical linkages and connectivity of India and Central Asia were narrated by S. K. Singh, former Indian Foreign Secretary in the following words:

For us, this region is full of historical memories: Places with evocative namesake intimately tied up with India's political, architectural, artistic, intellectual and dynastic history. Samarkand, Tashkent, Bukhara, Khiva, Khawarizm, Alma Ata, Ashkhabad, Kokand, are all parts of our medieval history. All of us as young students heard of Babur's beloved Farghana Valley and Andijan city, and his Uncle Ulugh Beg's observatory in Samarkand. This relationship with these people results today in children strongly attempting to speak Urdu, or people in their houses singing snatches from our film songs. These republics are coming into their own as players in Asia's South and West. This is bound to make a difference, geopolitically and economically. India must, at this time, show a genuine eagerness to assist advice and support them.¹⁶

Reconnecting India with Central Asia, despite geographical impediments, got an impetus after the disintegration of the USSR. India's response to the emergence of independent Central Asian states was swift and rapid. According to an Indian journalist S. Nihal Singh, "Unlike Pakistan, Indian stakes in former Soviet Central Asia were immense because of decades of its ties with Moscow." India has two major advantages in the New Central Asia: first, it is a very familiar entity in that region, thanks to close Moscow-Delhi relations and second, in trade and commerce, India offers a mix of state and private enterprises which these republics are seeking in bilateral relations. Indian expertise in the fields like construction, banking, management, consultancy and hoteling is being shared by the Central Asian states. India's concern vis-à-vis ECO at that time was that Pakistan was forging an anti-Indian alliance. Central Asia will remain a prime

¹⁶ S. K. Singh, "Born free with pains," *The Hindustan Times*, February 15, 1992.

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concern of Indian foreign policy in the years to come. India's engagement in the region extends beyond economic interests, as security and geopolitical factors are expected to gain significant prominence in the future.

In May 1993, the former Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao embarked on a diplomatic mission to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, two prominent nations situated in Central Asia. Moreover, during the month of February in 1992, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the President of Kazakhstan, visited India. Similarly, in February 1993, A. Abdullojanov, the President of Tajikistan, undertook a visit to Delhi. The significant advancement in India's expanding influence in Central Asia occurred when Prime Minister Narendra Modi undertook visits to all the Central Asian states in 2015. India devised the 'Connect Central Asia' policy during the inaugural India-Central Asia Dialogue held in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in 2012, with the aim of enhancing its influence and connectivity in the region of Central Asia. This policy primarily aimed to enhance political, economic, and defense relations, as well as foster linkages in the energy sector, between India and Central Asia. In 2017, India's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was facilitated by Russia, signifying a significant stride towards enhanced regional engagement on a comprehensive scale. Given China's existing presence in the region, India is placing greater emphasis on actively interacting with the region through various forms of diplomacy, such as economic, cultural, and trade initiatives. In its essence, three common perceptions held by India and CAS are: political stability, secular mode of governance and preventing religious extremism. Likewise, India and Central Asian regimes share preventing three threats: separatism, extremism, and terrorism. All the three strategic perceptions held by India and the Central Asia states also form the core of Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Strategic alignment of India and Central Asia could be gauged from the fact that no regional country has actively supported Pakistan's stance on Jammu & Kashmir in any international fora.

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The Pakistan factor holds an eminent position in India's Central Asian policy because of two reasons. First, there is an age-old paranoia in New Delhi that Pakistan wants a friendly regime in Kabul in order to get a geographical access to Central Asia. Afghanistan has borders with three Central Asian Republics: Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Second, India holds the view that its controlled parts of Jammu & Kashmir is in proximity with Gilgit & Baltistan, which is separated from Tajikistan with only 16 kilometers of strip called Wakhan corridor. Moreover, India possesses strategic interests in impeding Pakistan's continued expansion of its geopolitical influence with the United States, Russia, and China. The significance of this relationship is underscored by the United States' reliance on Pakistan as a strategic partner in its efforts to defeat terrorism. The United States has provided military support to Pakistan, amounting to a value of \$16 billion. Russia has initiated efforts to establish a closer relationship with Pakistan, engaging in bilateral talks and participating in multilateral discussions such as the Dushanbe summit, which included Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Therefore, it has become imperative for India to counteract the influence exerted by Pakistan. The Government of India must implement substantial efforts to achieve a balance in response to China's strategic and economic influence in the region, which is manifested by its involvement in organisations like the SCO, economic trade relationships, and investments in natural gas and oil pipelines. This is also taking into consideration China's strategic approach known as the "string of pearls" and its extensive presence in the aforementioned regions. Therefore, it is of significant importance for India to ensure that Central Asia does not succumb to the sole dominance of Russia and/or China.

The Islamic factor is considered significant in influencing India's Central Asian policy from the perspective of New Delhi. India's interest in this region is driven by the objective of containing 'radical' Islam, which has the potential to create political instability in the Central Asian Republics. This instability could then have a spill-over effect on Afghanistan and Pakistan, and ultimately impact the regions of Jammu and Kashmir. Among the five nations comprising Central Asia, Tajikistan holds

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significant relevance for India due to its strategic geographical closeness to Pakistan. India is highly attentive to the developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The main concern expressed is Islamic fundamentalism. This concern extends not only to India, but also to other countries such as Russia, China, and the European Union. The departure of NATO from Afghanistan, coupled with any major political and military developments in the region, has the potential to greatly amplify the movement for self-determination in Jammu and Kashmir. India's strategic interests are critically tied to political stability and the suppression of Islamic forces in Central Asia. However, in the context of India being accused of religious persecution, namely towards its Muslim minority during the BJP rule, it raises the question of how New Delhi might employ the 'Islamic card' to legitimise its feeling of threat from religious extremism and fanaticism in secular Central Asian states. India's approach in Central Asia involves presenting itself as a secular nation, while facing domestic criticism for the persecution of religious minorities, particularly of Muslims.

Dynamics of India's New Great Game in Central Asia

India, presently positioned as the fifth largest economy globally and with aspirations to ascend to the third place in the global economy in the near future, aims to adopt a strategic role in Central Asia, with a specific focus on enhancing trade, commerce, and security relations. According to a certain perspective, the contemporary geopolitical dynamics might be characterised as a "New Great Game," encompassing a multitude of factors such as energy resources, trade relations, connectivity initiatives, infrastructure development, ideological considerations, ethnic dynamics, and even the phenomenon of terrorism. Previously referred to as the "backyard" of the USSR, this region saw significant changes with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, resulting in the establishment of five distinct and autonomous republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The post-9/11 era has seen a heightened level of participation by the United States in the region, which further solidified the presence of the New Great Game. Conversely, China, with aspirations for regional influence, has expanded its involvement with

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Central Asia in recent years. China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, aimed at revitalising the historical Silk Road connecting China and Europe, will traverse the Central Asian region, commonly referred to as the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor. The lack of direct access to the ocean and major maritime shipping routes in Central Asian countries poses a significant obstacle to trade flow. In light of this, China's proposal to construct railways and develop road infrastructure as part of the BRI has the potential to greatly enhance connectivity in the region. Consequently, China stands to gain a favourable position in this regard.¹⁷ Similar to the Indian Ocean, the struggle between China and India in Central Asia carries favourable implications, as both prominent Asian powers aspire to establish a cooperative relationship rather than engaging as adversarial participants in the emerging geopolitical landscape. According to Nishtha Kaushiki, the geopolitical significance of the Central Asian Republics (CAR) has significantly increased for India. The significance of India's engagement with the CAR and Afghanistan has been heightened due to various factors. These include the abundant reserves of hydrocarbons, oil, and natural gas in the region, China's strategic and economic dominance in the area, and the United States' announcement of its intention to withdraw from Afghanistan. Consequently, it has become imperative for India to enhance its strategic, political, and economic relations with the CAR and Afghanistan. India's geostrategic interests in the region are influenced by the fact that the Central Asian countries adhere to a moderate form of Islam. India's primary concern is to prevent any of these nations from falling under the sway of 'radical' Islam, since this might potentially lead to the exportation of terrorism to India. This is particularly significant considering India's existing challenges with the secessionist movement in the Kashmir province. Given the historical rivalry between India and Pakistan, India has concerns regarding the political will and capability of Pakistan to ensure the protection of the specific segment of the Turkmenistan-

¹⁷ Parth Dave, "The great game in Central Asia and its relevance-for India," September 19, 2022, <https://thekootneeti.in/2022/09/19/the-great-game-in-central-asia-and-its-relevance-for-india/> accessed on April 28, 2023.

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Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline that is intended to facilitate India's access.”¹⁸

Therefore, an evaluation of India's general strategy towards Central Asia can be conducted through an examination of its Connect Central Asia Policy. The aforementioned strategy, which was developed during the inaugural India-Central Asia Dialogue in 2012, held in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, encompasses several significant aspects of India's diplomatic ties with the Central Asian region. The text discusses various aspects, including political interactions, economic contacts, defense cooperation, and the establishment of connections within the energy industry. During his policy statement delivered in Bishkek, the Minister of State for External Affairs of India, E Ahmed, highlighted the significant development of Central Asia's integration into the global economic and political sphere over the past two decades, with a particular emphasis on recent advancements. The trend of the increasing influence of Central Asia, notably in the global energy sector, is viewed favourably in India. The Central Asian countries are acknowledged as significant political allies within the extended geographical vicinity. India's inclusion in the SCO in June 2017 is a progressive move towards fostering stronger involvement with this particular region. The SCO holds significant regional importance, as India was granted observer status in 2005. India has demonstrated a noteworthy level of engagement in the region, resulting in a significant increase in government-to-government interactions. The aforementioned observation became evident during the tenure of Prime Minister Modi, who embarked on a diplomatic tour to all five Central Asian governments in July 2015. This marked the inaugural occasion in which an Indian Prime Minister undertook visits to all Central Asian states subsequent to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.¹⁹

India's proactive policy vis-à-vis Central Asian states needs to be examined in two ways. First, to give practical shape to its 'Connect

¹⁸ Nishtha Kaushiki, , *Op.cit.*

¹⁹ Nargis Jan, "The Role of India in New Great Game of Central Asia," *International Journal of Science and Research*, Vol. 11 No. 1, January 2022 Centre of Central Asian Studies, The University of Kashmir, www.ijsr.net accessed on April 28, 2023.

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Central Asia' policy unveiled in 2012, and second to strengthen its strategic ties with regional countries combating separatism, extremism and terrorism. Certainly, covert Indian ambitions in Central Asia is to promote anti-Pakistan sentiments on grounds of alleged involvement of Islamabad in cross-border terrorism. Concealing its own poor track record of human rights, particularly anti-Muslim drive, launched by BJP-Shiv Sena communal leaders is a shrewd Indian policy to project its so-called democratic and secular image in Central Asia.

Conclusion

India's road to Central Asia passes through Islamabad and Kabul. Without normalising relations with Islamabad and possessing normal ties with the Afghan regime, it will be an uphill task for India to gain direct access to Central Asia. One can figure out four major possibilities to analyse India's role in the New Great Game in coming years. First, in view of its surging economy and significant contribution in information technology, Central Asian states will tilt in favour of India for better connectivity in economic, commercial, trade, cultural and strategic terms. Past involvement of India in Central Asia during the Soviet days is a plus point for New Delhi.

Geographical impediment in Central Asia-India connectivity will be neutralised because of New Delhi's trade with Central Asian states from the Iranian port of Chabahar.²⁰ Till the time ties between India and Pakistan are normalised and Afghanistan is stable, India will exercise the option of its connectivity with Central Asia from the Iranian port of Chabahar. Second, strategic and security alignment of India and Central Asia by combating extremism, separatism and terrorism, will be a major reality in the days to come. In order to seek consonance with India because of its economic clout, Central Asian states tend to ignore the surge of religious extremism in India, particularly against Muslim minority. There is also a question mark about Indian secularism, which contradicts with the Central Asian secular mode of governance. The surge

²⁰ Soroush Aliasgary and Marin Ekstrom, "Chabahar port and Iran's strategic balancing with China and India," *The Diplomat*, October 21, 2021.

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of Hindu nationalism under state patronage undermines so-called credentials of Indian secularism. Third, under the framework of SCO India will go an extra mile to strengthen its ties with Central Asian members of the SCO. India will also try to make sure that no Central Asian state takes a hostile position against India on the Kashmir issue. So far CARs are not anti-Indian particularly on the issue of scrapping Article 370 and 35-A. For CARs absorbing Jammu & Kashmir by the Indian state will not make a difference because New Delhi, despite severe violation of human rights in held Valley has been able to control the situation. The holding of G-20 tourism conference in Srinagar in June 2023 is another message to the outside world. It basically tried to project that India's focus is on development, peace and stability in its occupied parts of Jammu and Kashmir. Age-old cultural and trade connections between Central Asia and the Indian occupied Jammu & Kashmir is another source of future connectivity between the two.

The Modi regime's constant threat to Pakistan that India will absorb Gilgit & Baltistan (G-B), which is located in the proximity of Central Asia is reflected in New Delhi's future ambitions in the region. How far India's ambition to absorb G-B in its fold like Jammu & Kashmir is yet to be seen but it seems given New Delhi's expansionist designs, such a plan is surely on the cards. During his visit to occupied Kashmir in October 2022, Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh expressed his aspiration for the inclusion of Gilgit-Baltistan into India, aiming to fulfill the objective initiated by the Modi government by the annexation of held Kashmir in August 2019. The assertions made by Singh pertain to a resolution from 1994 about Gilgit and Baltistan that was adopted by the Indian parliament under the tenure of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao.²¹

Finally, while focusing on strengthening its economy and holding over global power, India embarks on a long-term planning by augmenting its

²¹ "Indian Minister speaks of annexing Gilgit-Baltistan," *Daily Dawn* (Karachi), October 22, 2022. Also see, "Eye on Pakistan: India will achieve its goals when it reaches Gilgit-Baltistan," *The Times of India* (New Delhi), October 27, 2022.

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relationship with the friendly countries of Central Asia. Vision and prudence in foreign policy, despite domestic fault-lines, will enable the Indian state to sustain its proactive approach in Central Asia and at the same time thwart Pakistan's ambition to get a foothold in that region.

India's ambitious drive to Central Asia can only yield positive results if its economy is in good shape and pursues a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of neighbours. For that purpose, India needs to follow the Chinese model, as far as establishing influence in the world is concerned. Only with the application of soft and not hard power can India accomplish its ambition for meaningful connectivity in Central Asia. Taking the Great Game in a positive manner by promoting cooperation despite conflict, India and Central Asia can certainly make headway for mutually beneficial relationships. Pursuing an anti-Pakistan stance and using its influence to use Central Asian states against Islamabad will not help India. ■