

Viable Peace in Central Asia: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract: Central Asia has been viewed as most important geopolitical region where great powers' rivalry has sometimes created hope for peace but mostly they compete for their influence in the region. It has served as a hot belt of rivalry between the competing powers from early period which has not diminished even in New Great Game design. The major contenders of this rivalry are Russia, China, US, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan. These actors are pursuing their policies to achieve their objectives under the shade of peace. After intervention by the US and NATO, the security situation is still a major concern for the regional peace. The main causes of the present situation in Central Asia include lack of proper planning, shifting policies, and lack of understanding the geopolitical realities. The changing geopolitical dynamics of the region present challenge to consolidate peace.

A theoretical analysis of available materials in the form of books, Journals, news reports and website materials will help to provide broader outlook for understanding the regional challenges and causes, which hinder peace process in the region.

Keywords: Peace, Great game, Major players, Economic organizations and Islamic resurgence.

Introduction

Peace in central Asia is a major concern at present. For viable peace all newly emerged states have to co-operate with others to remain away from the dominance of the regional as well as international players. The five countries that have emerged in Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union are Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.¹ They are more vulnerable to crisis due to continued Great Game between Russia with US and its allies for strategic and economic influence in the region.²

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Russian Role in Central Asia

Russia is investing heavily in many projects to keep its influence intact. That legacy is a continuation of soviet policy: “integration and absorption advanced with new vitality.”³ During the Soviet period, the region’s republics supplied resources, served as sites for nuclear testing, the development of biological weapons, and space launches.⁴ An enduring melee of world powers for economic domination in the Caspian region is the major concern. After the declaration of independence by Central Asian states in 1991 from USSR⁵, their internal rivalry on borders since then made them dependent on Russian security, and their relationship is “utter bellicose” toward each other.⁶ According to Ahmad Rashid,

“The destabilizing feature of the five new states in Central Asia was that none of them could guarantee their own security. With no armed forces of their own, they were forced to depend on the military forces of the former colonial power, Russia, and on the good will of their neighbours not to stake claims on their borders.”⁷

Regional experts attribute Russia’s influence more to the mixture of proximity, history, and shared culture than to adept foreign policy.⁸ After independence all the republics face problem of security in order to safeguard their states effectively. According to Ahmad Rashid,

“Immediately after the break-up of the Soviet Union a Joint Military Command was set up in a bid to save the Soviet armed forces from disintegration. The six signatories of the agreement were Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia. Interminable negotiations began between Russia and these republics about their future military relationship.”⁹

The region is significant for whole Asia and need to co-operate for greater confidence building measures and prosperity. It stretches from Caspian Sea in the west, China in the east, Pakistan in the south and Russia in the north. It opened new challenges to the region after Allied troops invaded Afghanistan.¹⁰ The American led attack forced regional players to think over their role in the region and devise strategies for safeguarding their interests. Among the regional players, Iran is a close partner of Russia and Pakistan, a strategically confederate of America in war against terrorism and trustworthy partner and ally of China.

Iran’s Worries and Role in Central Asia

However, Iran has much influence over Afghanistan via three distinct assets in the form of Afghan people, the Afghan leadership and the province of Herat, which compelled international players about its role for viable peace in central Asia. The

Afghan society is based on ethnic groups; among these the Tajik is a Persian speaking people and Hazara, non Persian but Shia are broadly considered Iranian assets in Afghanistan. Iran has widespread ties with Afghan leadership and has major influence on the pro-American faction headed by Omer Zakhilwal.¹¹

The most important Iranian asset is the province of Herat, cradle of Afghanistan's history being an oasis town, irrigated farmland, a valley bounded by mountains and richest soil in central Asia.¹² This area is traditionally and economically integrated with Iran. Many families have their members working and developed marital relationships in Iran. Moreover Iranian government paid high cost to wheat to discourage opium cultivation.¹³

Iran's interest generally in Afghanistan is geopolitical and severed many war lords like Ismail Khan then Ghulam Yahya Akhbari, who restrained from resurgence foaming any unrest in their neighbourhood.¹⁴

Peace in Central Asia is core of Iranian foreign policy based on multi thronged design. So Central Asia is well-thought-out in Iranian foreign policy as an extension of the region of the Persian Gulf, which is an imperatively important zone for Iranian economic interests¹⁵. Iranian government conventionally shields the project of energy routes from Central Asian states via its land and space at the cheapest prize for economic benefits.¹⁶

The major tension between Kabul and Tehran is presence and future of US/NATO forces in Afghanistan and the US pressure to Kazakhstan government on nuclear arms embargo. Kabul government's failure about the free crossing of Jondollah terrorist group and flow of narcotics is among the serious concerns.¹⁷ In this regard Iran is more concerned about the future of this region, and Khamenei very eloquently said: "Real peace and security of the region will not be established as long as American troops are in Afghanistan"¹⁸. US presence in the region is envisioned vis-à-vis to barricade Iran and compel Iran to bow down in the Middle East and to reshape its policies in conformity with the interests to US and Israel. The US ambassador to Kazakhstan visited several times in a year in order to mount pressure on Sultan Nazarbyouf, to halt any kind of arms deal with Tehran government.

President Rafsanjani was keen to promote Economic links with central Asia States by using Clerical card to develop influence, cultural ties and tried to encourage students to study in Iran.¹⁹ In this regard Afghanistan is the central for convulsion of US-Iranian interests when the selection of successor government at Bonn Conference brought them together, when Hamid Karzai, a US choice was recognized by Iran to lead post-Taliban Afghanistan.²⁰ US special Coordinator for Afghanistan, Richard

Haas acknowledged Iranian contribution and its “Constructive role” and humanitarian aid to rebuild Afghanistan which Iran promised in Tokyo conference. So under informal tutelage of the UN committee Iran and US official met regularly for the rehabilitation of refugees and maintaining stability in Afghanistan.²¹ Russia devised policies that pressurized Central Asian states to give Russians dual citizenship and these efforts fashioned a new model of economic and military-political control over the region.²²

US and Its Allies

Russian hegemony in the region was observed as re-emergence of the Great Game, in which the US replaces Britain as Russia's main contestant in the region. Ex-Vice Premier Aleksandr' Shokhin stated in November 1993 that Russia would deploy every instrument of economic policy to advance the causes of reintegration of the Russian movement. He stated that the issue of Russian-speakers (not just Russians) abroad would appear and be tied to all economic negotiations with Central Asia members.²³ To overcome Russian influence in the region, U.S. is applying Turkish and Afghan card to achieve its goals but Turkey has its own interests which she wants to safeguard. As resistance to America and cynicism with the West grows, that move is eminently sensible to Turkey to seek an enhanced position in the common wealth of Muslim States in Central Asia. For this very purpose President Suleiman Demirel's journey to Tehran in July 1994 was very successful and he discussed all issues including the Kurdish problem at length. The commune and post-summit reports identified that both states conferred cooperation on shipping Central Asian energy through Iranian and Turkish pipeline routes that would bypass Russia.²⁴ However, US is much worried about Iran's emergence as regional power and United States Institute of Peace (USIP) published a report and warn of threats in region of Islamic fundamentalism and presence of nuclear capability.²⁵

The Shanghai Co-operation Organization is an obvious option for Iran to rollback US influence in the Eurasia. For Iran such cooperation could provide a shield to Iranian state against US-Israel attack on its nuclear assets. At this juncture when Iranian deputy foreign minister held informal talks with Ban Ki Moon through British mediation, Russian foreign minister swiftly tried to get credit of these talks while saying;

“We have turned a page to have Iranians and Americans at the same table all discussing Afghanistan.”²⁶

When US considered Iran's role more crucial and significant in achieving peace in the region, Israel's aim is to divert Central Asian states from pro-Iranian policies to

prevent nuclear proliferation from Kazakhstan to other Muslim states.²⁷ A Russian scholar has said that Afghanistan, though not economically important but its importance is centred on its geographical location in the region. It serves like nervous system for east and west. To have hold on the Afghanistan mean to have influence on every contender in the region. In such a situation, Russia will never like enemies who drove him out of Afghanistan,²⁸ which has now changed because of India's closeness to US.

Russia will do every kind of diplomacy and tactics to divert Central Asian oil and gas through its territory to reach the outside world to hold the nerve and have influence on the region.²⁹ Russia will always use its influence and won't like any other power penetrate its backyard.³⁰ For hold on the region, 2007–30 plan published by Russia's Institute of Energy Strategy unambiguously states that "Russian control over a large share of Central Asian gas needs to be maintained."³¹ Stephen Blank, professor of national security at the US Army War College, contends that Russia's recent claim that it has no imperialistic intentions in Central Asia does not mesh with the facts. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has even threatened to use "every conceivable economic pressure tactic" against non-cooperative regimes of Central Asian States.³²

China and Its Relation with CAS

China needs to ensure the region's stability to safeguard its borders. In this regard, the most successful inter-regional collaboration has been within the Shanghai Five group (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). After Uzbekistan joined it has become Shanghai Forum.³³ Uzbekistan has reserved its pleas for Russian military aid and accepted some from China. China's interest in Central Asia is growing as a trust worthy regional player with less colonial ambitions. Due to its very high mineral and energy wealth the region will play an increasing role in international affairs. China is energy-poor and needs to import more and more as its economy grows.³⁴ So a stable and prosperous Central Asia is in Beijing's interests. In this respect, China is concerned about the eastward expansion of NATO and the fact that all Central Asian states (except Tajikistan) are members of the Partnership for Peace (PFP) programme.³⁵ Capitalism and democracy concede both harmonious relation and tension between the two systems. As Charles Lindblom noted in *Politics and Markets* in 1977, "liberal democracy has arisen only in nations that are market-oriented."³⁶ Moreover, the two systems share many physiognomies, including ambiguous outcomes and pluralism.³⁷ Modern Scholarship put forth an apprehension that capitalism promotes the right to participate in democratic institutions; but both support and undercut people's capacity to work out that right.³⁸

Mikhail Gorbachev improved relations with China and China became a net trader of oil and this prompted its interest in Central Asia. In June 1997, the China National Petroleum Company (CNPC) acquired the Uzen oilfield in Kazakhstan, exploiting three oil fields in Aktyubinsk Oblast and is now second largest trading partner of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In 1992, the railway between Urumchi, Xinjiang and Almaty, Kazakhstan began main operation mode for diversifying economy. Many other border crossings have been opened since then. A major complaint of the Chinese is that Central Asian states engage in barter because of lack of hard currency.³⁹

China has a reliable player, Pakistan for Central Asia economic achievements. He can use its influence by mobilising his religious card and sympathy via Islamic clergy of Central Asia being Sunni. Islamabad observes India as the greatest threat to its security and India's its active role in Afghanistan and in Central Asian States for its existence. Hence, it is vital for Pakistan to have good relations with China and a huge economic corridor was found in Guarder Port in Baluchistan.⁴⁰

Pakistan and Its Role in Central Asia

Pakistan got historic opportunity in building political and economic relationship with central Asian States after breakdown of Soviet Russia.⁴¹ Pakistan recognized the independence of Central Asian States and established diplomatic relations with them and was enthusiastic for greater cooperation by offering long term credit of importing light engineering goods to develop regional economic cooperation. Pakistan leadership was and is keen to figure out economic community like the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).⁴²

Pakistan wants to develop its influence and to exploit central Asian resources. In an inaugural ceremony of ECO Cultural Association Islamabad in November 1992, Pakistan Foreign Minister Mohammad Siddiq Khan very passionate pointed out, "It is like long lost brothers meeting once again and joining in a deep embrace." He further said that ECO could not be complete without the Central Asian States. Central Asia has been the main home for all our people, and by joining with them we are reaching our people back to the original homeland of many amongst us.⁴³

For Pakistan, peace and stability in Central Asia is key to its foreign policy and a trust gain method. Pakistan did a commendable job in resolving's conflicts of ethnic/territorial nature though being are multi-dimensional. To overcome such conflicts Pakistan launched bilateral initiatives for termination of hostilities in Tajikistan. Pakistan's efforts for promoting peace and stability in the region are also

assumed under the patronage of economic co-operation organisation (ECO) with other ECO member countries. Even some Pakistani writers have advised to adopt a cautious policy vis-a-vis the volatile political situation in Central Asia.⁴⁴

While emphasizing the economic objectives of the ECO, Mr Nawaz Sharif declared, the desires of 300 million people who share a common heritage and culture have been understood... Together our nations can build a prosperous and vibrant society. The ECO should embark on a comprehensive strategy for cooperation.⁴⁵ Pakistan's Foreign Secretary Shaharyar Khan exposing the objectives of ECO said, "The Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) is not a Muslim block, but an economic block and ECO countries are focussing their reflexions on economic issues."⁴⁶

Pakistan signed many memorandum of understanding with almost all six states of central Asia through Institutes and to make viable relations with them Pakistan paid five thousand tons of rice to feed the Azer refugees from Armenia⁴⁷ and in respect to this a parliamentarian delegation led by Muhammad Elbar Saldor Oglo visited Pakistan and assured full cooperation in strengthening economic, political and other bilateral relations.⁴⁸ In Islamabad session of ECO, emphasis was given on capillary link necessary between regional Cooperation for Development setup by Pakistan, Iran and Turkey in 1964 to facilitate trade and communication.

Once Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharief outwardly rejected the US claims and cleared that ECO is meant for greater economic co-operation which includes expansion of trade, promotion of joint ventures, telecommunication, tourism and consolidation of cultural and spiritual ties.⁴⁹ A drastic change occurred in the relation of Islamabad and Iran due to Taliban who were unfriendly with Iran and occupied the long stretch of the Afghan-Iran border region which had historically been under Iranian Influence.⁵⁰ Pakistan refused to participate in the Tehran Conference held on 27-28 October 1996 for finding a way to resolve the Afghan crisis by inviting India in the conference which further widened the gap when Iran Invited India to use Iran – Turkmenistan railroad.⁵¹

The major power challenges is due to the attitude of "Great Game" design which is shaped by sensitivity of the former Soviet republics towards the Muslim countries whom Russia observe as a new block and a threat to its interests as a rival power bloc. To counter and hinder the progress of such a block Russia adopted a new code of CIS instead of ECO to forge the ECO design by creating doubts of Islamic fundamentalism."⁵²

Other than Russia, the Western countries are also suspicious of reorganisation of Islamic block in Central Asia. Though there is emerging Islamic revivalism with roots

deep with different ideological groups to make a significant discontinuity with their despotic past of their rulers under Soviet Russia.⁵³ But if this revivalism is handled with honour and respect, they will emerge as democrats and will pay way for regional development. Instead their clampdown in political participation will result as a new wave of conservative fundamentalism as observed in some states that used inhuman majors to curb revivalism.⁵⁴

Moreover, US National Intelligence Service recently concluded that the greatest increase in demand for energy would be in China and India. This means that by 2015 only one tenth of the oil produced in the Persian Gulf region will go to the western market. US is playing a global card as tool for free flow of capital, goods, services and labour is pursued by number of countries⁵⁵ to protect their respective industries. Until now Russia and the west have been competing to build pipelines to carry the black gold to western markets. Russia is no longer trying to block the Baku–Ceyhan pipeline because it believes that it can compete successfully with it.⁵⁶ Though it could be envisaged that Central Asia is coming under the strong indirect influence of China, Russia or even (less plausibly) the United States, direct annexation and the re-imposition of imperial rule is much less likely.⁵⁷

Both Russia and China have significant political and economic interests that seem to be united diplomatically and pretentiously against American global hegemony, but Russia has worries about Chinese proposition for domination in East Asia too.⁵⁸ Regional expert Vladimir Paramonov and Aleksey Stokov assert that Russian leaders essentially “had it backwards” by thinking that in order to strengthen its position in Central Asia, Russia first needs to “recover its international status.”⁵⁹ But they are well-known about Russia’s economic and military weakness and will continue to depend on their own limited interior resources and external relationships.⁶⁰

The Russians have to reaffirm its influence in Central Asia by establishing active participation in several multinational organizations. Jos Boonstra explains that the Kremlin professed stability in Central Asia as a guarantor of Russian national security and intended to build stability through a “variety of regional organisations that connexion in membership and purpose.”⁶¹ The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Eurasian Economic Community and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) represent Russian attempts to meet its objectives. Paramonov and Stokov’s views provide ample evidence in support of other scholars’ assertions that Russia used the CSTO as a counter to NATO.⁶² Such efforts though help to build Russia’s dominance but cannot serve virtuously for viable peace in the region. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates responded that the Russians were “trying to have it

both ways,” making “positive noises about working with us” but “working against us in terms of that airfield.”⁶³

Recent developments indeed confirm Russia’s reassertion of a “zone of influence” in this portion of the former Soviet Union.⁶⁴ Andrei Serenko, cofounder of a Russian commission focused on Afghanistan, confirms that “Russia wants to be the only master of the Central Asian domain” and “to the maximum extent possible . . . make things difficult for the U.S in making the transfer of American forces into Afghanistan to be dependent on the will of the Kremlin.”⁶⁵ Exhibiting its weakness for having the last word in the region, in the wake of the eventual Manas-eviction rollback, Russia upset Uzbekistan by declaring plans to open a CSTO base at Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan.⁶⁶

Another detrimental policy for the peace in the region is uncertainty prevailing with Russia and Commonwealth of Independent States⁶⁷ economic hegemony. Russia could be supposed a ‘Cold War’ counter to the CIS members for dropping its supplies to them. Above mentioned states are non-coastal and far from major world trade routes. To trade overseas on their own means invest huge amounts of capital in transportation and infrastructure which is beyond their capacity and afford and have deteriorating economic, demographic, and ecological problems.”⁶⁸ In this regard joint venture in transportation and infrastructure needs peace and security which is not possible without guarantees of regions great players. Whoever controls trade and pipeline routes for goods and oil will decide the region's economic and political destiny.⁶⁹

These republics having overwhelming Muslim population emerged with a hope that they will serve their interest well and are keen to have Islam as their spinal on every sphere of life. But the heads of the states are communist turned democrats with anti-religious attitude. Their rule is Corrupt, ineffective and undemocratic resulted in ever greater poverty and inequality. They disseminate Islam as a major threat to their rule and are internationally playing card of fundamentalist threat. For peace regional governments should conduct free and fair elections to promote democracy and need to introduce judicial reforms so as to protect Civil rights, to avoid ruthless and repressive measures.⁷⁰ It is also subjected by rulers whose ruthlessness in crushing dissent has, according to some specialists, fed the very extremism they seek to suppress.

“If you’re too tough on people, something going to happen,” said an Asian diplomat who spent several years as an ambassador in Uzbekistan, where human rights groups say thousands of Muslims, accused of being Islamic insurgents, have been unjustly arrested, tortured and even killed. “The instinct out there is to repress,” the diplomat

said, “which might have worked when the lid was on tight, as it was during the Soviet period. But now some people who feel victimized by repression are turning to Taliban for help.”⁷¹

Challenges to Peace and Great Game in Central Asia

A policy of reconciliation needs to be adopted in the form of providing general amnesty and encouraging resurgent groups to participate in the democratic setup in a peaceful manner. Moreover, NATO’s standpoint, of ‘reconciliation revolves around people themselves to forsake violence and terrorism and respect their constitution, which constitutes the rights of women, children and minorities’.⁷²

To make peace a dream come true a regional dialogue meeting was held titled New Geopolitics of peace operations: A Dialogue with Emerging Powers’ in Astana on 5th–6th November 2013, Kazakhstan. However, most participants saw peace operations as not very relevant to peace and security within Central Asia. While discussing regional security geopolitical interests were seen as primary concern and more important. In general, countries in the region may be encouraged to take part in peace operations because of economic incentives as well as prospects to advance international experience and image, and to modernize and train their military forces.⁷³

Conclusion

Bulk of internal challenges that are waiting on or knocking at the door of central Asian States exposed the region towards the fragmentation, prone to border and internal war and ethnic conflicts. The drug challenge is worst which harbours the war lords and organised criminals and pays way for extremism. But the greatest challenge in central Asian States is the great game challenge which serves many internal as well as external contenders to develop their influence. The external challenge is the regional players’ interests and European stakeholders who are trying to develop their sphere of influence for greater economic benefits. This geopolitical game is prevailing due to the cold war designs of the international powers including USA, Russia, China and other regional powers. This power concert in the region is deserting the security of these undernourished, flimsy states and is creating security challenges of the region. Stability and prosperity of the region can be attained by networking it to the world peace. A comprehensive and mutual trust is required to discuss all the aspects necessary for peace and prosperity. Proper channels of coordination and information exchange, for peace, security, through political and economic reforms need to be established. In central Asia inclusive approach (Confidence building measures with Islamic Groups) is necessary rather than exclusive designs. The region becomes stable, peaceful and prosperous when regional countries will highly speed up their economic reforms and respect to human rights, democratic values

and develop vibrant civil societies. The countries of the region are integrated into global economy via East-West corridor of cooperation stretching from China and Afghanistan across the Caucasus to the Mediterranean. Central Asian countries are landlocked and dependent on transportation, water management, and energy distribution upon each other. Great cooperation is needed to allow each other to flow water and use trade routes for development which will subsequently result in peace and development. The existing mechanisms and capacities, and priorities need to be revised. The US has to share table with regional contenders which hindered the peace efforts of US due to fear in the region. Otherwise, in current blustery circumstances peace is just a dream in the region and world will face a new 9/11 of high magnitude.

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