

**STRATEGIC AND SECURITY**  
**PERSPECTIVE OF CENTRAL ASIA**

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## CERTIFICATE

Certified that the dissertation titled **STRATEGIC AND SECURITY PERSPECTIVE OF CENTRAL ASIA** submitted by Col S K Dalal in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**, has not been previously submitted for any degree of this or any other university. This is his own dissertation.

We recommend that this dissertation may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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**STRATEGIC AND SECURITY**  
**PERSPECTIVE OF CENTRAL ASIA**

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## PREFACE

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 on USA and their aftermath suddenly catapulted Central Asia to centre stage of world politics, altering the course of geopolitics of the region. The five Central Asian states have a Muslim majority, lie at the centre of major commerce routes, have large reserves of unexploited energy and other natural resources, have their borders with major powers of the world - Russia and China - and are in close proximity to the volatile Middle East. With Afghanistan and Pakistan, epicentre of international terrorism, located to its South, the region assumes great geostrategic importance. The region is currently witnessing a 'New Great Game' between USA, Russia, China and the Islamic Fundamentalist elements for domination of the region, where every player is jostling for more manoeuvre space. This study is an attempt to address various issues concerned with security and geostrategic aspects of Central Asian region.

The first chapter introduces the subject, where essential issues confronting the region and the involvement of the international community have been briefly covered. It also lays down the structure of this study. The second chapter covers a vast canvas giving an overview of the profile of Central Asia – its geography in outline, historical perspective, development of society and efforts at the emergence of independent nation states. Issues concerned with security, geostrategic importance, the 'New Great Game' and exploitation of natural resources have been highlighted. Ethnicity is an important element in the region, with a potential of fomenting intra state and inter state conflicts and disputes. The competition for extraction and export of oil and natural gas from the region is hotting up, with major players of the world throwing their hats in the ring. The laying of pipelines from a landlocked region has further complicated matters.

Chapter 3 discusses cultural and religious heritage, Islamic revivalism, role of Islam in the polity of the region, and Islamic Fundamentalism. The region, devoid of open professing of faith during the Soviet era, saw an eruption in religious faith after the break up of the Soviet Union. Preachers from the conservative Islamic world, especially Saudi Arabia and Pakistan came in large numbers with loads of money. Though the

## II

region has a secular culture, where Sufi cult has been an important element of faith, practice of conservative Islam is on the rise. A number of militant Islamic organisations have sprung up over the last ten years, taking advantage of an ideological vacuum after the withdrawal of Communism and the general state of disgruntlement in the populace.

Interests of various regional and world powers are covered in the fourth chapter. USA has entered the region as part of its anti terror war, and is here to stay. By positioning itself in the region, USA is able to keep an eye on Russia, Iran, China and Islamic extremist forces. It would also be able to provide security to its multi national corporations involved in the extraction and export of oil and gas from the region, in addition to attempts at creating an international transportation corridor for free movement of goods and commerce.

USA has made its intentions clear regarding its determination to command and control access to the world's energy resources by its recent war on Iraq. This should have sent the alarm bells ringing in Central Asia, as the regimes there are despotic, dictatorial and weak, giving enough reasons to USA to manipulate them. The region is likely to witness far reaching geopolitical changes in the near future, as a result of intense Great Power rivalry, and contest for exploitation of natural resources and for geopolitical space.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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30 Apr 2003

  
Col S K Dalal

**GLOSSARY OF NON-ENGLISH WORDS**

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| Apparatchik         | - <i>operator of mechanical devices, man in charge of apparatus</i>   |
| Dar-ul-Islam        | - <i>the abode of Islam</i>   |
| Deobandi            | - <i>an Islamic community following the teachings of the Islamic school in Deoband, Uttar Pradesh, India</i>  |
| Glasnost            | - <i>openness</i>   |
| Hadith              | - <i>Mohemmadan Traditions, Sayings of Prophet Mohammad as preserved in collections of Traditions</i>   |
| Hajj                | - <i>the annual pilgrimage to Mecca</i>   |
| Hanafi              | - <i>an Islamic community and school founded by the pupils of Imam Abu Hanifa, Hanafi school originated in Iraq and was the official religious doctrine in the time of the Abbasids</i> |
| Islam               | - <i>to enter into peace with God</i>   |
| Jehad               | - <i>the using or exerting one's utmost power, effort, endeavours or ability in contending with an object of disapprobation</i>   |
| Kolkhoze            | - <i>collective farm</i>  |
| Khilafat(Caliphate) | - <i>a state ruled by the successors of the Prophet, the caliph (Khalifa), ruler of Islam</i>   |
| Madarsa             | - <i>Islamic religious seminary</i>   |

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| Mufti        | - <i>an Islamic religious lawyer of standing, who can give a formal legal opinion or fatwa</i>   |
| Mujahideen   | - <i>Muslims who have the right to work out all questions from the very foundation; one, who by his own assertions forms his own opinion, religious fighters</i> |
| Nomenclatura | - <i>nomenclature</i>  |
| Mullah       | - <i>Muslim functionaries usually appointed to take care of the mosque</i>   |
| Perestroika  | - <i>reconstruction, rebuilding</i>  |
| Shaminism    | - <i>ancient religion found in the nomadic tribes of Siberia, known for healing and psychoanalytic cures</i>   |
| Shia         | - <i>a branch of Islam, party or faction of Ali</i>  |
| Sharia       | - <i>law based on the Koran, the path to be followed</i>   |
| Sovkhoze     | - <i>cooperative farm</i>  |
| Sufis        | - <i>an Islamic mystical order</i>   |
| Sunni        | - <i>a branch of Islam, followers of sunnah, custom of the Prophet</i>   |
| Tariqa       | - <i>way or path, the teachings and devotional practices of Sufi brotherhoods</i>  |
| Tengri       | - <i>ancient religious belief common in the nomads of Mongolia, now almost extinct</i>   |

Umma - *Muslim community of believers*

Wahabism - *a radical fundamentalist community of Islam, founded by  
Mohammad bin Abd al Wahab, in Saudi Arabia*

## ***CHAPTER I***

# CENTRAL ASIA





## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Sir Halford Mackinder, a distinguished British geographer and the founding father of the geo-political theory of the heartland, had imbued the Central Asian landmass with a near mystical significance. "He had suggested that there was a pivotal area 'in the closed heartland of Euro-Asia' which was most likely to become the seat of world power. He called this area, collectively known as the Southern Tier – 'the geographical pivot of history.'"<sup>1</sup> Historically, Central Asia has played a pivotal role in shaping the Eurasian civilisation. The recent events in the world, especially Afghanistan, and the presently prevailing political, social, economic and security situation in the region, with outside powers making efforts to establish their presence on a permanent basis, amid latent and manifest instability have brought the geopolitical importance of the region in prime focus.

The collapse of the erstwhile Soviet Union resulted in the creation of fifteen new independent states, each with its own national identity, problems and policies. The political, economic and military power of Russia, the successor state to the USSR was reduced dramatically. The transformation of the union republics into independent territorial nation-states as a consequence of the disintegration of the Soviet Union has raised a number of basic conceptual and philosophical issues.

The region encompassing the newly independent states of the Caucasus and Central Asia, stretching from the Volga and Don estuaries into the mountains that link the Black and Caspian Seas, Europe and Asia to the steppes of Mongolia may be termed as the Southern Tier. The pundits of geo-politics have considered this region as the centre of political gravity, because it encloses more frontiers than any other region in the world - the frontiers of India, China, Europe and the Middle East meet in Central Asia. The Central Asian region consists of the five states of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgystan; and is perhaps one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse regions of the world. It comprises deserts, grasslands and mountains, and extends from the Caspian Sea in the West to the Tien

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<sup>1</sup> Jones, Scott A. , "Introduction" in Gary K Bertsch, Cassidy Craft, Scott A Jones, and Michael Beck, ed., *Crossroads and Conflict, Security and Foreign Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia*, New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 1-24, p. 1.

Shan Mountains bordering China in the East. It continues to be severally affected by tides of religious revivalism, religious fundamentalism, nationalistic fervour, and demand for greater autonomy and freedom, in addition to rivalry by outside powers for domination and economic exploitation.

“A unique feature of the location of this region is that it is totally land locked. Even the access of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan to the Caspian Sea does not give them access beyond their immediate neighbours. Being land locked states, getting access to the Southern seas to be linked with the world market is very important for them.”<sup>2</sup> Another factor enhancing the importance of this region is its predominant Muslim population coupled with its location next to what may be termed as a geo-strategic melting pot - West Asia. Central Asian region has the potential to be the linchpin and gateway to West, East and South Asia and Russia from the West.

The complex domestic, cultural, regional and international factors underlying many of the conflicts in the area complicate any efforts to bring peace and stability. “Although each situation is unique, several factors are at play in a number of disputes. Key domestic and cultural elements include the Soviet legacy, ethnic and religious differences, instability of the current transitional period, the growing problem of corruption, and increasing economic inequalities caused by the uneven distribution of wealth, which often leads to competition for natural resources.”<sup>3</sup> International factors include the contest for political and economic influence in the region by the West led by USA, European powers, Japan, Korea and the regional players including Iran, Turkey, Russia and China. The US and Europe clearly have a serious interest in gaining hegemony over the region and taking over the responsibility of ensuring peace and security there. The ‘New Great Game’ being played in the region for its domination has four major players: USA, Russia, China and Islamic extremist forces, in addition to the fringe players like Iran, Turkey, India and Pakistan. Therefore, the tasks set by the new republics before themselves seem to have been put in the order of priority of: regime protection and political stability, maintenance of intra-ethnic and social peace, tackling the extremely difficult economic situation and then proceeding to economic development which may be the best guarantee for ensuring the attainment of objectives. Introduction of democratic reforms appear to be a distant fourth goal.

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<sup>2</sup> Bakshi, Jyotsna, “Russian Policy Towards Central Asia-1”, *Strategic Analysis*, Jan 1999, pp. 1577-1590, p. 1586.

<sup>3</sup> Jones, Scott A., n. 1, p. 2.

Given its enormous natural riches, Central Asia holds the key that will shape the strategic environment of the world in the decades to come. The states are in an urgent need for development and smooth transition of their economies. They also possess one of the world's largest reservoirs of natural resources, including oil, natural gas, uranium, gold and other precious metals etc. Despite the vast resources of oil and natural gas, their current energy production is dwarfed by what could be in store in the coming decades. With their current low level of production and poor infrastructure, every one of these republics is in dire need of foreign capital as well as modern technology to exploit their buried natural reserves. The geo-politics of the new reserves and the implications of the enormous Western investments in the region are certainly going to have a major impact on the future of the region for decades to come.

An important threat to stability arises from the arbitrarily drawn up borders between the states. The borders bear little relation to the ethnic realities of the region and large groups of one nationality find themselves in another country. With disintegration of USSR and the swift de-Russification that followed, the sense of ethnic identity and ancient tribal and clan loyalties has sharpened, as each republic and ethnic community seeks to rediscover its historical roots and its long suppressed language and culture. This has led to increased polarisation in relations with other ethnic communities, especially the large non-titular communities in each Central Asian country.

The Central Asian states generally, do not possess strong armed forces. The strongest forces in the region are those of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. As such, they are dependent upon Russia to provide them military aid and assistance. All five Central Asian states have signed bilateral friendship treaties with Russia for this purpose. Central Asian states do not perceive any outside direct threat to their territorial integrity in the near future; though the region suffers from a plethora of internal security problems with manifestations beyond their borders, ranging from ethno-nationalist fervour, secessionist movements, spread of Islamic radicalism, illegal drug trafficking to arms proliferation.

Common problems, such as ethnicity, environmental degradation, common economic space and drug mafia can best be tackled with cooperation. The unstable conditions, competition between states of the region and between outside powers, vast oil and natural gas reserves and the region situated on the international terrorism fault line, all make regional cooperation for development and security a central issue. All the Central Asian states became members of the CIS, and all except Turkmenistan signed a Treaty on Collective Security with the Russian Federation, providing for collective response to aggression against any of its

signatories. However, to reduce the possibilities of Russian domination over Central Asian states and to chart out an independent course of foreign policy free from Russian influence, the Central Asian leaders have tried to create a broader security space, which would include UNO, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), NATO and other Western international security structures. The Central Asian states, in addition to participating in the NATO Partnership for Peace programme, have also established diplomatic relations with NATO. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is also assuming a growing role in the post-cold war global diplomacy. In addition, China has also made deep inroads into the region, especially in trade and business. It is also looking at exploiting the energy resources of the region for its expanding economy. However, Central Asian cooperation has suffered on account of the clash of leadership ambitions between the Presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and the entry of USA in the region.

One of the most important issues before the newly independent states was the redefinition of nationhood, formation of nation-states and national interests as per the new realities. The Central Asian states were at an advantage, as the definition could be based on religion, with all states being predominantly Muslims, and on ethnicity. The Soviet nationality policy of emphasising ethnicity as the foundation of political identity, and making the vernacular as the distinguishing element of nationality of the major ethnic groups, has served as an ideal blueprint for nation formation in Central Asia. "For the first time in their history, the Central Asians are in possession of a well-defined area and are identified with a modern type of political structure, namely the territorial national state, in which, to repeat, the nation and the state formally coincide. The source of national identity is ethnicity based on language, and indeed ethnicity and language appear to define national territorial statehood."<sup>4</sup>

At the national level, though other forms of identity may not be visible superficially, other forms of identity like clan, tribe and region have always been present at least at the level of the ruling elite; fierce personal loyalties at the political level are considered necessary for any benefits from the state. "Ethnic diversity of the states is seen as a major source of instability and rise of tensions. However, the continuity of leadership has allowed leaders essentially to contain or suppress potential ethnic disputes."<sup>5</sup> This arrangement was challenged in Tajikistan by a coalition of regional, Islamic and democratic forces, leading to a

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<sup>4</sup> Karpat, Kemal H., "The Socio-political Environment Conditioning the Foreign Policy of the Central Asian States" in Adeed Dawisha and Karen Dawisha, ed., *The Making of Foreign Policy in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, London: M E Sharpe, 1995, pp. 177-214, p. 183.

fragmented political order and a genocidal conflict. However, this resurrection was not surprising, as Tajik national consciousness had failed to penetrate into many regions of Tajikistan, with political power resting with a number of regional groupings. Tajik nationalism has been a weak link in state formation, superimposed as it is by regional and clan loyalties. A similar situation does exist in other states as well, where selected regional, clan and tribal groupings corner political power. However, these states have maintained stability and consolidated their control over their respective territories. Acute political and social upheavals have mostly been avoided in Central Asia until now; though the Central Asian states misconstrued as stabilising may actually obscure underlying problems, allowing the seeds of future conflicts to germinate. Simultaneously, the nomenclatura elites, though united in accepting the primacy of national ethnic identities, also strive to promote the idea that Central Asia is a cultural whole. This desire is reflected to some extent in the foreign policy of the Central Asian states.

While important religious and cultural threads run through the fabric of the region, the region's complexity is marked by its diversity and lack of uniform views. The Turkish and Persian cultural and linguistic divide is the most distinctive of these differences. Ethnic communities transcending international boundaries with severe inter-ethnic competition and rivalry for domination, hegemonic ambitions of the more dominating groupings and maximising share in existing resources are the other major areas of discord in the region. The break up of the Soviet Union had generated fears of Islamic revivalism tending towards fundamentalism in Central Asia, especially in view of Islamic revolutions in neighbouring Iran and Afghanistan and the Taliban factor. This concern was warranted and genuine. However, presently cultural Islam has shown an upward trend, political Islam remaining limited in scope. In fact, Islamic revivalism in the region has been largely limited to the rediscovery of culture, history and national identity. With most states having religious and ethnic disparities, with strong clan, tribal and regional loyalties, and the ruling elite wary of Islamic revivalism, it is highly unlikely that radical Islam could grow as a movement. The emergence of Taliban in Afghanistan, with the avowed aim of creating Dar-ul-Islam, and a Sunni following, definitely posed a threat to the republics. However, even this influence of Talibanised thinking has little chances of success, as the Central Asian states are secular in outlook, have a tight control over their society, and the ruling class consists of the old Soviet nomenclatura elite. Moreover, Central Asia has a Sufi cult, which espouses tolerance for all

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<sup>5</sup> Jones, Scott A., n. 1, p. 9.

religions. Essentially, “two religious revivals are occurring in Central Asia simultaneously. One is a broad-based popular return to a lost national and Islamic heritage, the other a much more narrowly based attempt, on the part of a comparatively small number of believers, if not actually to introduce an Islamic state, then at least to reduce the gap between public behaviour and the tenets of Islam.”<sup>6</sup> Islamic extremism can only take roots in the region as a result of popular disenchantment and dissatisfaction with the government, when the latter is unable to deliver the social and economic needs of the people, and due to poor governance and corruption. In that scenario, politicised Islam can become a vehicle for social justice and for the opposition to take on the government. While meeting the social and economic aspirations of the people, adequate opportunities to Islam for political participation could keep Islamic extremism at bay. Suppression of any Islamic activity outside the officially sanctioned ones can also make the regimes susceptible to radical Islam. The Central Asian states are also conscious of the Muslim card in their relations with the rest of the world. While following a secular policy at home, they have tried to develop economic relations with Muslim countries, in search of economic aid and funds. “The problem is most of the aid programmes of Muslim countries are linked to the projects designed to propagate faith, and in light of the dangers of Islamic extremism, the republics have been more eager to work with the rest of the world instead.”<sup>7</sup>

As the Central Asian states try to establish rule of law and national identities, while guiding their economies through the transitional phase, corruption has become a growing menace. Many authors regard deeply ingrained corruption as the biggest obstacle to economic, social and political reforms. It is one of the major obstacles to nation- building in the region and a major factor in distorting a fair and equitable distribution of wealth. Other internal threats that plague the Central Asian states and society are drug trafficking, mafia, arms smuggling, lack of adequate reforms in the economy leading to mass unemployment and poverty; severe class disparities between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots; and, dictatorial and autocratic rules.

The September 11, 2001 tragedy has come as a God sent opportunity for American

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<sup>6</sup> Olcott, Martha Brill, “Islam and Fundamentalism in Independent Central Asia”, in Ro’i, Yaacov, ed., “*Muslim Eurasia, Conflicting Legacies*”, London: Frank Cass, 1995, pp. 21-40, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Tazmini, Ghonchen, “The Islamic Revolution in Central Asia: A Potent Force or a Misconception”, *Central Asian Survey*, 2001, 20(1), pp. 56-85, p. 76.

entry into Central Asia. Prior to this incident, though America had been attempting to increase its presence in the region, it had not been very successful and forthcoming, as the region was considered primarily as Russian area of interest and domain. Therefore, any diplomatic and economic forays made prior to September 11, 2001, were with the tacit agreement of the Russians. However, the situation has dramatically altered since. USA has been able to establish a strong foothold in the region successfully, with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgystan giving basing rights to the USA. US forces will be in a position to provide security cover to their economic interests in the region, providing the necessary encouragement to the multi national corporations to invest, and ensuring safe outflow of oil and gas for the developed world. 'US influence and military presence in Afghanistan and the Central Asian states, not unlike that over the oil-rich Gulf States, would be a major strategic gain', says V R Raghavan, a strategic analyst and former General in the Indian army. Raghavan believes that the prospect of a Western military presence in a region extending from Turkey to Tajikistan could not have escaped strategists, where a military campaign aimed at changing the political order in Afghanistan, accused by the United States of harbouring Osama bin Laden, has been undertaken. The 'Great Game' in Afghanistan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was about Russia and Britain trying to dominate and seek access to the warm water ports of the Persian Gulf, today it is concerned with oil, and gas, trade routes and creating areas of influence in Central Asia.

It is also pertinent to remember that USA has always found it more convenient and comfortable to deal with despotic and dictatorial regimes; may it be Nicaragua or South Korea or Iran (the Shah's rule), Arab states, Philippines or Pakistan. It finds dealing with democracies in the developing world more problematic. Therefore, USA would provide encouragement and security to inept, corrupt and quasi-democratic regimes in Central Asia, keep them in good humour, and ensure they remain in power. USA will not hesitate to meddle in the internal affairs of these states, to serve its own interests, which are primarily economic. Therefore, any prolonged US presence in the region is likely to upset the existing power equations, cause more internal unrest and disturbances, increase vulnerabilities of the existing regimes and create friction between the nations of the region, while posing a major threat to Russian interests in the region.

Russia has always considered Central Asia to be its soft underbelly; the region is now included as part of the 'near abroad', where Russia would not like outside powers to intervene. In addition, Russia has two primary reasons for being involved in the region: one, to protect the Russian Diaspora, and two, to maintain access to important resources.

Moreover, “despite its withdrawal from Central Asia, Russia could not ignore its security concerns, geopolitical links and collective security interests in maintaining security in the region.”<sup>8</sup> However, because of transition and a declining economy, Russia has agreed to American entry into the region, in view of the threat of international terrorism. Though the US entry has been termed as partnership programme between USA and Russia, it is likely to harm Russian interests in the end. Under the present circumstances, Russia could do little to prevent American entry, due to its economic weaknesses and the states themselves offering bases to USA, in return for economic largesse. In spite of the above, “geography cannot be altered, and Russia will maintain a presence in the region.”<sup>9</sup> On the positive side, Russia has managed to provide security to the region through its presence in Tajikistan. Its interest lies in preventing instability from spreading from Tajikistan to the rest of Central Asia and to the Russian Federation itself. In addition, it would like a friendly regime to remain in power in Tajikistan, with its military units stationed there helping Russia in meeting its foreign policy goals. The bottom line is that Russia will continue to be involved in regional peacemaking efforts.

After the break up of USSR, Turkish leaders made it clear that they wanted to play an important role in the region, to provide an appropriate ‘model’ for the new states, and to act as a window and link to the Western world. Ethnic and linguistic affinity, a well-developed industrial base, a vibrant private sector and the perception of being the West’s partner made Turkey initially an attractive proposition for the Central Asian countries. Turkey also offered itself as an alternate route for the transportation of oil. Turkey views itself as a natural ally of the Central Asian states because of its pan-Turkish character. However, Central Asian states experienced disillusionment regarding Turkey’s inability to provide the needed financial assistance, with its education system not at par with the Soviet system. It was thus considered as an inadequate model and source for educational and economic development. The idea of pan-Turkism propagated initially, has also been swept aside. Iran’s geostrategic position gives it substantial advantages over other potential competitors in Central Asia. Its 2000 km long frontier with Turkmenistan makes it easier for Iran to offer to the regional states an easy access to the sea. Iran’s other assets include the historically strong influence of Iranian culture in the more settled areas of Central Asia and the ethnic and linguistic proximity of Tajiks to the Iranians, which ironically is also inhibitive in developing good relations with

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<sup>8</sup> Alam, Mohammad Munir, “Central Asian Republics Quest for Security Since Independence”, *Contemporary Central Asia*, Vol. IV, No. 3, 2000, pp. 28-48, p.30.

<sup>9</sup> Jones, Scott A., n. 1, p. 15.



other Central Asian states, specially Uzbekistan. Moreover, US sanctions against Iran have acted as a dampener.

Chinese policy in Central Asia aims to maintain political stability through economic development. It has built rail links with Kazakhstan and has emerged as a significant trading partner. China is also exploring the feasibility of constructing a pipeline through its territory and onwards to Japan. Stability in Central Asia is essential to Chinese economic growth as the Central Asian countries could provide most of the oil and gas that China's industries are likely to require. China has also succeeded in alleviating the fears of the Central Asian countries about its intentions, by signing an agreement on confidence building measures in April 1995. China's ambitions in Central Asia (particularly an oil pipeline that has major strategic implications) will inevitably clash with those of USA and Russia in the decades to come.

Pakistan shares a common history, culture and religion with the region. The closest port anywhere, available to the Central Asian states is at Karachi. It is keen to improve bilateral relations with them and partake in the exploitation of the region's resources. A very important spin off for Pakistan will be that it would acquire 'strategic depth' vis-à-vis India, if it has good relations with the region. Pakistan's support to the Taliban fundamentalist elements in Afghanistan and elsewhere however, has made these states suspicious of its role, especially in fanning fundamentalist Islamic thoughts in the region.

The region assumes great significance for India, geopolitically, economically and strategically, especially in its fight against international terrorism. Pakistan's designs at gaining strategic depth and creating an anti-India Islamic bloc, availability of Central Asia as market for Indian goods, ensuring that monopolisation of exploitation of Central Asian natural resources does not take place to the detriment of Indian interests, maintaining secular credentials and creating a secular front, fighting drugs and arms smuggling, and ensuring a stable neighbourhood are some of the other major Indian concerns in the region. However, India's inability to inject financial resources and non-availability of a direct access route have been the main obstacles to India obtaining a firm foothold in the region.

### **Scope and Objectives**

The purpose of this study is to analyse the geopolitical and strategic significance of Central Asian states, along with their security implications. It covers the post-Soviet disintegration period until date, while the previous period is briefly touched upon as part of the historical background.

The following objectives have been laid out for the study: -

- a) To cover briefly the historical background, providing a backdrop to present day problems facing the region and a brief genesis of these problems along with likely areas of convergence and divergence.
- (b) To provide an insight into the geopolitical and strategic importance of the region.
- (c) A brief expose of the regional security perspective. Discussion of major issues afflicting the region, namely, nationalism, and ethnicity, social and economic problems, economic transition and inter-state issues related to security.
- (d) Islamic Revivalism and Fundamentalism in the region along with all their manifestations and the effect of present Afghan situation.
- (e) Discussion of interests of major world powers – USA, Western world, Russia, China, and the regional states of Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan, while going into the situation post September 11, 2001.
- (f) India's interests in the region.

### **Preview**

The study is covered in the following chapters: -

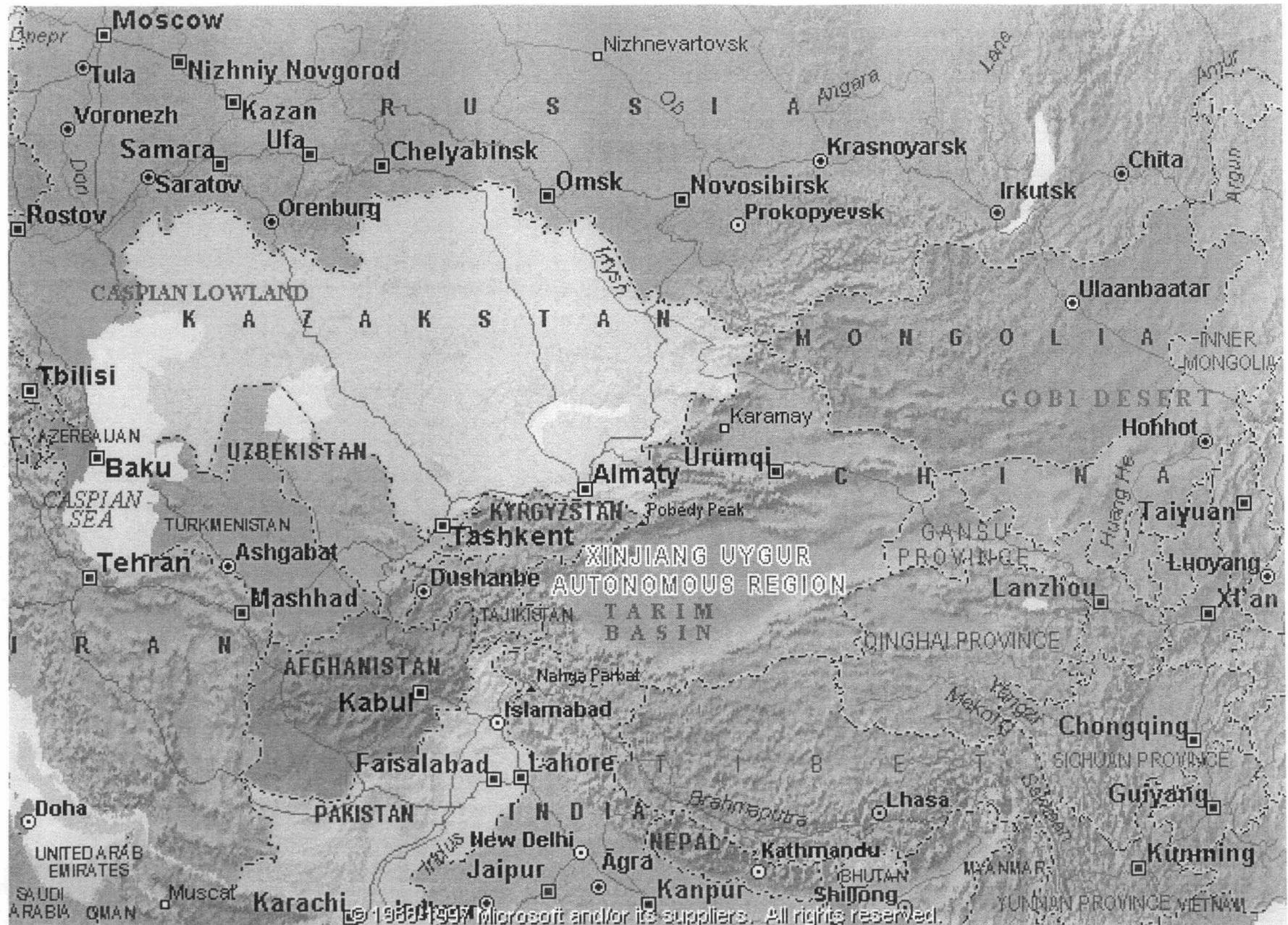
- (a) **Chapter I. Introduction.**
- (b) **Chapter II. Profile of Central Asia.**
- (c) **Chapter III. Revival of Islam and Threat of Islamic Fundamentalism.**
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### **Sources of Data**

The material for the study has been collected from various books, periodicals and internet. The bibliography is given at Appendix attached.

## **CHAPTER II**

# CENTRAL ASIA



## CHAPTER II

### PROFILE OF CENTRAL ASIA

#### Historical Background And Development Into Independent States

##### Historical Background

Central Asia has passed through several political and religious doctrines and has been the centre of civilisations, religions and wars over the last two and a half millennia. The Amu Darya (Oxus) and Syr Darya (Jaxartes) bound most of the Central Asian territory before they fall in the Aral Sea. They have been major cultural, geographical and political boundaries of the region. While the former river separates the region from the South, the latter provides protection from Mongolia and Siberia. The area also has the world's highest mountains – the Pamirs, the Tien Shan, with the Himalayas to the South. There exist some massive deserts in the region – the Kara Kum Desert in Turkmenistan and Kyzl Kum Desert in Uzbekistan. Between these deserts and mountains are lush green well-irrigated valleys, which are thickly populated, while the rest of the region is sparsely populated. The Fergana Valley in the heart of Central Asia has 20 percent of the region's population, covering an area of only about 200 by 70 miles.

Darius I had added the region then called Transoxania to his Persian empire in 500 BC. However, soon after the Turks ousted the Persians. Alexander then annexed the territory, creating the Bactrian empire that ruled Central Asia up to 140 BC. The invasion by Alexander (326-323 BC) can be considered as an important benchmark and early date maker, though it did not leave any enduring imprint. Thereafter, the region came under the sway of the Sakas and the Huns, and later the Kushans, whose rule extended over Northern India, Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Xinjiang. The invasions by various Chinese, Turk and Mongol tribes continued until the arrival of Arabs in 750 AD. Direct participation by Central Asia in world events later, continued to influence the political and cultural events in Europe as well as the rest of Asia. The region stood in the centre of world trade route until the ocean route from Europe to Asia was not discovered.

Though many authors use the designation 'Muslim' in their analyses when referring to the people of the region, however, this may not be entirely correct as Islam has been a new

phenomenon, and the region has been at the heart of Buddhism and other ancient religions and cultures before the arrival of Islam. Islam is the latest religion to reach Central Asia. The ancient Tengri and Shamanism, which appear to have co-existed with Zoroastrianism, prevailed even after the arrival of Buddhism, which flourished in the region during the Kushan rule.

“The introduction of Islam into Central Asia went through roughly three stages: force of arms and alms, the scholasticist madarsa, Sufism.”<sup>10</sup> The Zoroastrian Persians, and not the Shamanistic and Buddhist Turks were the first ones to embrace Islam after the arrival of Arabs. The Chinese foray was decisively beaten in 750 AD, making the region Turkish rather than Chinese. A number of independent Muslim kingdoms came up thereafter, Bukhara being the most prominent, ruled by the Persian Samanids. Finally, the Mongols descended on the region, who also added Rus and parts of Europe as part of their domain, establishing the Chengisid dynasty. The local rulers partially professed Islam until the arrival of Chengis Khan on the scene in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. During the intervening period, the region saw a fusion of Arabs, Turks and Persians, as also Mongols in the region. However, as majority of the armies mainly consisted of Turks from 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Turkish dynasties came to dominate the Islamic world in large numbers. Chengis Khan and his sons created an empire in the region in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, with Rus as one of its vassals. The new empire, like its predecessors was religiously tolerant. The Khans themselves had faith in their traditional beliefs of Shamanism and Tengri. Within one century of their conquest, they embraced Islam, becoming markedly less tolerant of other religions. Although this conversion contributed to their own decline, the process strengthened the Islamic and Turkish patterns that existed in Central Asia before the advent of the Chengisid conquests. Taimur, a Turk used Chengisid legitimacy and his clan ruled most of Central Asia and Northern India from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Timurids ruled Central Asia with their capital at Samarqand. The Shaybani Uzbeks (descendants of Uzbek Khan, a grandson of Genghis Khan, the Mongol invader) defeated them in 1500 AD, who established their kingdom in the region with Bukhara as its capital.

Thus, the three main peoples to accept Islam were firmly established – Arabs, Persians and Turks, knowledge was preserved and literature created in all the three languages. The post-Mongol period saw a flexible use of languages by the rulers. The

educated during this period came to be versed in all the three languages, and thus, language alone was not a sure indicator of ethnicity. Yet, the differences among peoples of various tribes remained. The traditional values of each tribe were retained and preserved. Thus, Central Asia has retained the distinct identities of the Arabs, Persians and Turks, along with their mutual hostility and tension, despite the rhetoric of Islamic unity.

Islam spread in the region slowly, and those farthest from the Islamic borders were the last to embrace Islam. The Kazakh and Kyrgys of the steppes were the last to convert in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, made possible due to the policies of Catherine II. "The Kazakh and Kyrgys even today retain much of their pre-Islamic way of life, including drinking and extensive personal independence of women so characteristic of steppe societies."<sup>11</sup>

Central Asia, including the Xinjiang province of China until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was a major cultural sphere. Its role in trade and commerce, as well as exchange of ideas between East and West is well known. The area traded in precious items during the ancient period, where traders came from far and wide with their goods, because of the central location of the region. It thus became a meeting place for major religions of the world, resulting in an inter-mingling of religious thoughts, cultures and ways of life. It is also a meeting ground for the steppes and the sown lands, where a peaceful inter-mingling of settled people and nomadics occurred.

The region lost its significance due to the discovery of the sea route from Europe to India, and the Industrial Revolution in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Modern state laws and institutions were established in Europe during this period. A similar system could not be built in Central Asia, as in this region the personal charisma of the leaders was always predominant overruling the institutions, may be because of the constant threat of invasions, their sense of insecurity and palace intrigues. The merchants of the region dealt with only local trade after the loss of long distance trade routes.

Thus, the empires of the middle ages started a process of political fragmentation and internal squabbling after 15<sup>th</sup> century that gradually undermined their military prowess. At the same time, Tsarist Russia began to exert pressure on the ethnic groups like Uzbeks, Tatars and Kazakhs. During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the "Russian forces captured areas to the

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<sup>10</sup> Paksoy, H. B., *Nationality or Religion? Views of Central Asian Islam*, on website <http://www.ku.edu/~ibetext/texts/paksoy-6/index.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

East like Tatar, Kazan and Astrakhan. Russian advances southwards started in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to the semi arid steppes along the Black, Caspian and the Aral Seas.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Tsarist Expansion**

By the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century, the powerful empires that held sway in Central Asia were mortally wounded by struggles and civil wars for the thrones, and due to the shift of commerce to maritime trade. After the fall of Timurid and Safanid dynasties, the area had broken into a number of relatively small states, resulting in the formation of three weak Khanates – Bukhara, Khiva and Kokand. The European expansion coincided with the economic decline of these states, embroiled in internecine warfare. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Tsarist Armies had started a slow southward expansion, taking the Kazakh steppe in 1715. The vast military apparatus of the Russians, not strong enough to move westward into Europe, found the weak and fractious Central Asian region as an easy prey. Moreover, with loss of American supplies of cotton due to the American Civil War, the Russians looked towards Central Asia for more cotton for their factories. Russian expansionist efforts in 18<sup>th</sup> century had established an arch of forts in the steppe region and Siberia. Their southward expansion picked up momentum in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The defeat in Crimean War further spurred the Russian southward move. The Tsarist military occupation of Central Asia was completed between 1865 and 1881, bringing the region under direct military rule. They established the province of Russian Turkistan with capital at Tashkent, while Khiva and Bukhara were retained separately as protectorates.

The Central Asians had offered stiff resistance to Russian southward expansion. The Kazakh population resisted for nearly 50 years in the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, while the conquest of the Central Asian Khanates and Bukhara also met with resistance, though sporadic. Their resistance subsided by 1860s. The Kazakhs and the Kyrgys rebelled again in 1916 against the Tsar’s attempt to draft them in military-labour battalions.

### **Central Asia During Soviet Period**

The Communist revolution of 1917 led to an initial upsurge of nationalist sentiments among the Central Asians, who dreamt of creating their own national governments. The Bolsheviks tolerated them until the victory of the Red Army over the White Army in the civil

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<sup>12</sup> Dawisha, Karen and Bruce Parrott, *Russia and the New States of Eurasia: The Politics of Upheaval*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 437, p. 46.



war. Thereafter, Sovietisation of Central Asia started in right earnest in 1923. It was accompanied by suppression of Islam, political purges and social changes, forced land resettlements and collectivisation programmes including wiping out the system of nomadism.

National delimitation was carried out in 1924 in Central Asia. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan were granted statehood in 1924, Tajikistan in 1929, and Kazakhstan and Kyrgystan in 1936. These states were neither created based on a popular demand, nor on historical facts, nor on geographical lines. They were created on ethno-linguistic basis, to grant right to self-determination to ethnic minorities as promised by the Bolsheviks and to create a free association of sovereign states. However, the creation of these states resulted in the consolidation of a national identity and a national state, where none existed earlier, which had the potential to lead to nationalistic movements against the Soviet state later. Moreover, these artificial borders divided ethnic communities. While the Tajiks got Tajikistan, it was without their cultural and political centres of Samarqand and Bukhara, which went to Uzbekistan. The Fergana Valley was divided between Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgystan.

There was massive state repression affecting the life of the entire population. The local population revolted but in a disorganised manner. Collectivisation mainly targeted the nomadic Kazakh, Kyrgys and Turkmen tribes, forcing a large number of Kazakhs and Kyrgys to flee to China. The most effective rebellion was by the Basmachis. "The Basmachi rebellion consisted of a number of guerrilla groups in regions as far as Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. These Muslim groups were fighting for a number of causes: jihad, Sharia, Turkish nationalism and anti-Communism. They remained divided by clan and tribal loyalties, and never developed a coherent leadership or ideology."<sup>13</sup> The fiercest attack in USSR was on religion, be it Christianity or Islam. The institutional framework of religion in the Soviet Union, including madarsas and mosques was closed, and individual believers were persecuted. Practise of religion was banned. Few mosques were retained which were registered and run by state appointed mullahs, termed by critics as 'official Islam'. However, 'unofficial Islam' sustained the religion during this period. Clandestine mosques were run by unregistered mullahs, and madarsas were run at homes. The Sufi sects were active, especially in the rural areas, where they also distributed religious literature. Marriages were carried out clandestinely in a traditional manner. The Soviets succeeded largely in their attempts to stamp out the practice of religion, but were unable to eliminate its influence, which was

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<sup>13</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad – The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, Hyderabad, India: Orient Longman Private Limited, 2002, pp. 281, p. 35.

especially strong in the countryside. The state was not able to replace Islam from the life of the Central Asians, as the society was not transformed into a modern society in totality; this was possible only in the urban areas, the rural areas remaining unaffected. The spiritual vacuum created as a result of non-accessibility to religious practises later led to a revival of Islam.

“For all the repression they brought, the Soviets also carried out progressive reforms, in the availability of mass education and health care, growth of industry, development of mechanised methods of farming and irrigation, and the creation of a communication infrastructure integrated with Russia.”<sup>14</sup> In addition, there was a massive effort at social engineering. The state decided to carry out complete social transformation, affecting almost every facet of public and private life. Concrete jungles and high-rise buildings, with broad avenues replaced old structures. Many historical monuments were destroyed or mutilated. Education system, religion, social activities like marriage etc. were all affected. Very high rate of literacy was achieved; health care of good quality was free for all citizens; and emancipation of women was accomplished. No other region has perhaps felt the benefits of socialist system in the Soviet Union more than the Central Asian region. This was possible entirely due to the positive discrimination that Moscow ensured in the region’s favour. In terms of education, technical training and infrastructural facilities, there were dramatic and substantial improvements. At the time of break up of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian states were far ahead of their Muslim neighbours in terms of literacy and social welfare facilities. These were some of the major achievements of the era. The aim of the whole exercise was to bring Central Asian society at par with the rest of USSR.

The Soviet Union followed a system of two sets of identities: the national or ethnic, and the overarching Soviet identity. It was presumed that over a period of time, with the ethnic societies slowly transforming themselves into modern entities, the modern Soviet identity would only remain. However, this could only be possible in the urban societies, which were most advantaged by benefits of modern education; whereas most of the Central Asian population was rural based and conservative, with most employed in the ‘sovkhozes’ and ‘kolkhozes’ there.

Soviet rule was enforced through the cooption of local elites, creating vested interests in the polity, intelligentsia and society. The power structure that was functional during the rule of Khanates – that of client-patron networks - continued to flourish during the Soviet

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 37.

period. Though this system provided some sort of stability to the region, it also created mafias. "The local Communist parties – many of whose members were Muslims – were in reality built on regional and clan alliances"<sup>15</sup>, which created local mafias and centres of power with well-entrenched vested interests.

The ill effects of the socialist structure persist even today: corruption and nepotism are rampant, lethargy and inefficiency hamper production, and client-patron system has resulted in fissiparous tendency in the states. A decline in gross production had commenced by mid 1970s, because of poor technology and lack of modern management techniques.

Some sort of religious and nationalist awakening had started forming in the region in the 1960s. It got further impetus during Gorbachevian period, fuelled by glasnost and perestroika, and the anti corruption campaign that specifically targeted the Central Asian states. The all-Union press humiliated the Central Asian leadership publicly. Resentment against such national humiliation coupled with resurgence in interest in Islam resulted in deep hostility and resentment against central rule. Criminal investigations in Uzbekistan in 1980s against cases of embezzlement soon became an agent of persecution, when thousands were arrested. The First Secretary of the party, Rashidov died under suspicious circumstances in 1983, reported to have committed suicide. The removal of Kazakh party First Secretary Kunayev from office in Dec 1986 led to mass student protests in Almaty. The Iranian revolution and the Afghan war contributed to the spread of Islamist ideologies in the region. Glasnost permitted the re-emergence of Islamic values and the founding of parties with Islamic orientation like the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) in Soviet Union, with the social and political liberalisation under perestroika, leading to a revival of Islamic activities in Central Asia, with the construction of thousands of mosques. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia distributed free copies of Koran and other religious literature among the population. The Afghan war drew a number of recruits from the region for the Soviet Army, who came back impressed by the religious zeal and dedication of the Afghan Mujahideen. "In 1986, the secret services of USA, UK and Pakistan agreed to a plan to launch guerrilla attacks into Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, who were supplying the Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Afghan Mujahideen crossed the Amu Darya in Mar 1988 and launched rocket attacks on villages in Tajikistan."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 43-44.

### **Evolution of New States**

The Soviet Union broke up because of internal contradictions, after the three Slavic states of Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia decided to secede from the Union. Gorbachev dissolved the Soviet Union in Dec 1991, and 15 new republics were created out of the debris of USSR. The Central Asian states faced grave hardships and great challenges at the time of their formation into new states. They had been heavily dependent upon subsidies from Moscow. The immediate impact of the dissolution of the Soviet Union was therefore critical. The region was the most backward region of Soviet Union economically; its economy was tied up with the economy of Russia, as all the raw materials produced in the region had their factories in the Russian Federation, while the finished products came back. The states had no knowledge and expertise on foreign policy and conduct of business relations with other states. The leadership was quite happy with the centre subsidising their economy, and were not interested in independence. All these states had initially backed the August coup against Gorbachev. Thus, to the ruling elite independence was an unwelcome fait accompli.

All the Central Asian states needed massive foreign funding for their economic reforms, privatisation, and modernisation for them to come out of dire economic situation. The first ten years of independent functioning has seen a lot of internal strife, and conflicts in the region, with a fall in their gross domestic product output, massive unemployment, poor health and education facilities, the rise of a neo-rich class mostly from the ruling elite, and ever increasing gap between the rich and the poor. Initially, the states tried to remain part of the rouble zone, but Russia itself was in a severe crisis; they perforce had to declare their own currencies in 1993-4.

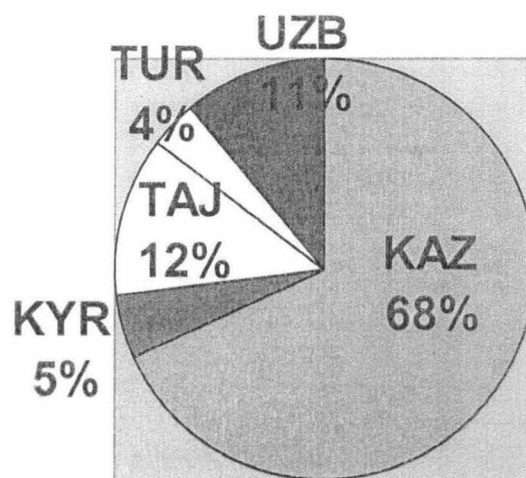
During the Soviet period, most of the Central Asian states had a monoculture economy. Cotton was cultivated extensively, used almost entirely in the rest of the erstwhile Soviet Union. The region is rich in certain precious metals and valuable mineral and natural resources, particularly natural gas and oil. In terms of area and GDP, Kazakhstan is the largest state, whereas maximum population is in Uzbekistan. Details are given at Table 1.

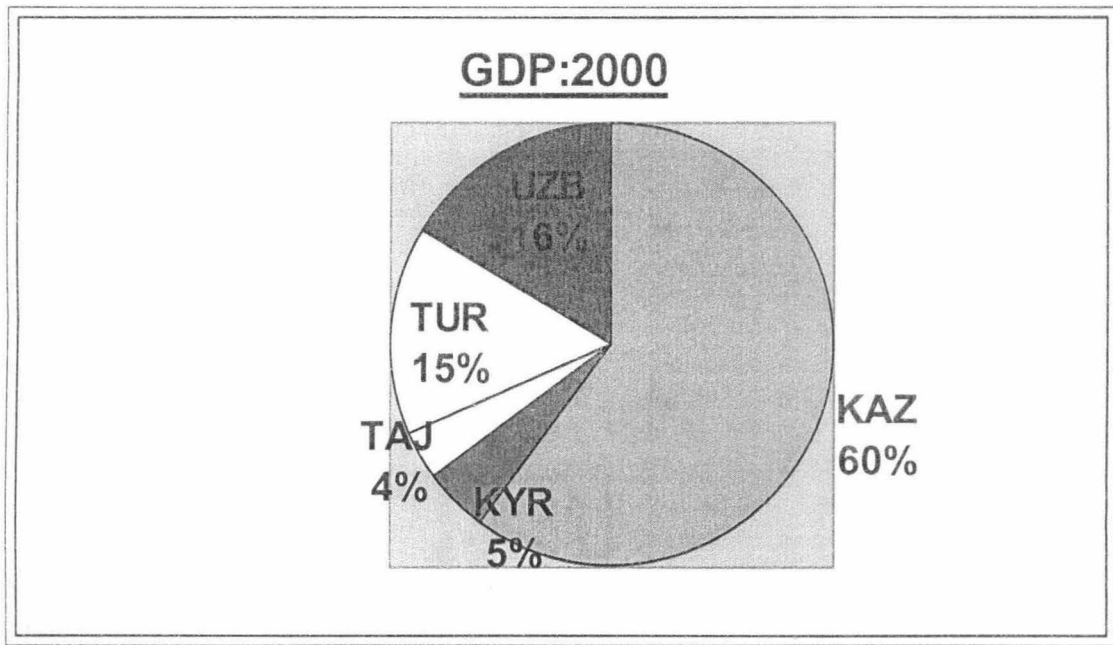
Kazakhstan has abundance of natural resources - oil, iron ore, manganese, uranium, chrome, titanium, nickel, molybdenum, bauxite and copper. It also has one of the largest finds of oil and natural gas. Uzbekistan has the largest population – 24 million people, and an abundance of natural resources, is self-sufficient in energy and grains, and has the largest gold reserves in the world. It is the largest producer of cotton, which is the country's main foreign exchange earner. Turkmenistan though large, is sparsely populated but is abundantly

**TABLE 1**  
**COMPARATIVE TABLE OF AREA, GDP AND POPULATION**

| <u>ITEM</u>                          | <u>KAZAKH</u> | <u>KYRGYS</u> | <u>TAJIK</u> | <u>TURK</u> | <u>UZBEK</u> |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| AREA<br>(sq km)                      | 27,17,300     | 1,99,900      | 4,88,100     | 1,43,100    | 4,47,400     |
| POPULATION                           | 1,48,41,900   | 48,67,000     | 47,37,000    | 62,02,000   | 2,47,50,000  |
| POPULATION<br>DENSITY<br>(per sq km) | 5.5           | 24.6          | 9.7          | 43.3        | 56.0         |
| GDP 1999<br>(million \$)             | 12600         | 1021.5        | 772.96       | 3857        | 3121.1       |
| 2000                                 | 17300         | 1369.6        | 1038.4       | 4402.8      | 4684         |
| 2001                                 | NA            | 1548.4        | NA           | NA          | NA           |

**AREA IN SQ KM**





Source: *The Europa World Year Book*, London: Europa Publications, 2002, 43<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Volume II.

endowed with natural resources, being the fourth largest producer of natural gas in the world. Kyrgystan and Tajikistan are much poorer and less developed, although the former possesses large reserves of gold, while the latter has the potential to be developed for tourism if it is able to develop into a stable state.

The process of economic transformation of the states is still on, and it will take some more time before their economies stabilise to a relatively higher rate of growth. Nevertheless, their economies have emerged out of the negative rate of growth, with their GDPs crossing that of pre-1990. Russia still remains major trading partner of the region, though it has lost a lot of ground to other countries. It initially followed an isolationist policy, as it was convinced that the Central Asian states had nowhere to go, and as soon as Russia's economy recovered, they would be compelled to fall completely within its influence. However, this assumption was proved wrong. The Central Asian states could not wait till eternity and wanted to create some kind of a counterbalance to Russia. The Central Asian Union comprising of Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan and Uzbekistan was thus formed in 1994. Tajikistan joined in 1998, while Russia was given an observer status in 1996. At the same time, Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was created in Dec 1991, with 11 of the 15 republics of the former Soviet Union (except the three Baltic States and Georgia) joining it.

Russia changed its policies towards the 'near abroad' in 1993, and started to follow an integrationist approach, desiring larger integration of the members within the CIS. Russia put

forth a proposal of creating an economically and politically integrated association of states in 1995. "The gradual expansion of the Customs Union, the formation of a common capital market, the creation of a system of collective security, and so on was included."<sup>17</sup> Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan, Belarus joined Russia for a larger integration as a 'union of four' in Mar 1996. However, this has not made much progress on ground. Moreover, other initiatives have also not taken off because they mainly remained on paper only; and because Russia, struggling with its own domestic difficulties, could not be a centre of gravity for the Central Asian states. In addition, they had already started steering an independent course in international relations by then. Russian authorities also failed to take advantage of the spread of Russian language and the information and cultural space available. More importantly, while charting a different course, all the states have dug into their own regional, cultural, historical and ethnic roots, estranging them from Russia further.

Meanwhile, the Central Asian states have continued to integrate with the international community, fine-tuning their foreign policy over a period of time. They have "become members of international organisations such as Asian Development Bank, IMF, UNO, OIC, ECO, IAEA, Interpol, WHO and WTO. At the bilateral level they have established diplomatic ties with more than 50 countries."<sup>18</sup>

The nomenclatura has ensured a peaceful transition from Communist ideology to a nationalist leadership. This has been possible mainly due to the availability of a strong power base, rooted in traditional patron-client and clan affiliations. The opposition groups have had limited following in the native intelligentsia, and have not been able to mobilise the masses in their favour. Moreover, the leadership was quick enough to adopt most of the opposition's agenda, relaxing the restraints on cultural, linguistic and religious expression. Islam was also officially accepted as a symbol of Central Asian identity, and the leaders adopted visible Islamic credentials. However, "at the end of their first decade of independence, the Central Asian countries found themselves facing enormous political unrest, endemic poverty, and rampant unemployment; while a completely new problem – Islamic militancy – threatened the stability of the entire region"<sup>19</sup>, mainly as a result of dictatorial regimes in power.

<sup>17</sup> Zviagelskaya, Irina D, "Russia's Policy Options in Central Asia", in Chufrin, Gennady, ed., *Russia and Asia – The Emerging Security Agenda*, Sipri, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 123-136, p. 126.

<sup>18</sup> Shams-us-Din, "The New Great Game in Central Asia", *International Studies*, 34, 3, 1997, New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 329-341, p. 330.

<sup>19</sup> Ahmed Rashid, n. 13, p. 58.

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### Development of Democracy and Society

“Central Asian society is marked by its comparatively traditional social structure. The region is far less urbanised than the rest of the erstwhile Soviet Union, with a 40 percent urban population, against 66 percent for the other former Soviet republics.”<sup>20</sup> Low migration rate and high birth rate in rural areas has resulted in a decline of percentage of urban population. As a result, ethnic Central Asia remains concentrated in the rural areas, while European origin people have a disproportionately large concentration in cities. In all the Central Asian states, ties to family, tribe, clan and locality are very strong elements of the social fabric.

The Soviet regime did not make any efforts to transform the social structure in Central Asia, and continued with the feudalistic clan oriented patron-client system that was prevalent earlier. Therefore, even after 70 years of Communism with a modern universal education system, the ties to family, clan, tribe and locality (mahalla) are far stronger than in the developed countries. As a result, democracy has not been able to flourish in post-Soviet Central Asia. Elections have therefore, not been fair and impartial. The institutions of coercion that were in vogue earlier have not been subjected to civilian political control.

In fact, “the Central Asian states have moved from single party authoritarian Communist system to personalised authoritarianism of their executive presidents – Niyazov, Karimov, Nazarbayev, Akaev, or Rakhmonov. The republics have not been successful in forging an effective party or a block of parties of their own. All power is concentrated in the hands of the President, and he alone exercises them, quite often arbitrarily, and at times in violation of the constitution. Checks and balances, independent judiciary and democratic rights are conspicuous by their absence.”<sup>21</sup> Though all the states except Turkmenistan have established multi party system, the tight control of their Presidents over state machinery has ensured that no party or individual is able to emerge as serious contender for the top slot, by way of arrests, intimidations, imprisonment, killings or disqualification. Turkmenistan has shown the least changes from the Soviet model, following a single party system, with the Communist Party of Turkmenistan renaming itself as Democratic Party of Turkmenistan. “President Akaev of Kyrgystan was the only leader, who sounded democratic in 1991, with Kyrgystan gaining the reputation as an ‘oasis of democracy’ in the sprawling desert of authoritarianism in Central Asia. However, by 1995, he too started resorting to anti-

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<sup>20</sup> Dawisha, Karen and Bruce Parrott, n. 12, p. 147.

<sup>21</sup> Kaushik, Devendra, “The Central Asian Republics: The Balance Sheet of a Decade of ‘Ozodi’”, *Eurasian Studies* No. 20, Special Issue, Summer 2001, pp. 3- 21, p. 4.



democratic means to stay in power.”<sup>22</sup> All the Presidents have extended their tenures by way of referendums, or fighting against an extremely weak and friendly opposition candidate, disqualifying the stronger opponents.

It is evident that transition to multi party democracy in all these states has not made much headway. With most of the states aligning with the US led alliance in its fight against terrorism, the need for democratic reforms, as a precondition for the substantial Western aid and assistance is no more there. Thus, the entry of USA in the region has given the present incumbents in Central Asia a fresh lease of life, where all or any opposition is branded as Islamic extremism. Therefore, willy-nilly USA is providing moral, political, financial, and military backing to authoritarian regimes, as the alternative is considered as too risky, indirectly giving fillip to spread of Islamic extremism in the region. This fragile character of authoritarian rule has been exposed repeatedly in Indonesia, Philippines or even the Shah’s Iran. “It thwarts the development of democratic institutions like an independent judiciary, free press, and competing political parties eliminating the possibilities of a peaceful change without convulsions. Living standards in all these states have fallen considerably. There is a gradual deterioration of social welfare, health care and education system. Disease and malnutrition have taken a heavy toll. Disparities between rich and poor and rampant corruption have further eroded social stability.”<sup>23</sup>

All the Central Asian states have a presidential form of government in place, with an elected parliament. The media is also more active and constructive than during the Soviet period. However, the civil society lacks stability, as the major ingredients of such a civil society like a strong system of political parties, a commitment by the state machinery and functionaries to respect the laws of the land, an independent judiciary, and a free press; coupled with a poor economic base and under-developed system of private property are absent. Thus, the disappearance of Soviet ideology has left a political vacuum, which has not been filled by a vibrant democratic polity.

### **Ethnicity And National Identity**

In his book titled ‘Nationalism in Russia and Central Asian Republics’, Prof Shams-ud-Din says, ‘The Soviet collapse and the decline of Marxism-Leninism as a source of political legitimacy created an ideological vacuum, prompting a search for fresh principles of political organisation, where national identity emerged as one of the strongest pillars of

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

legitimacy'. Ethnicity and religion have been the two most important sources of national identity. An ethnic group can be defined as a "historically formed aggregate of people who have a real or imaginary association with a territory, a shared cluster of beliefs and values, connoting its distinctiveness in relation to similar groups and recognised as such by the other."<sup>24</sup> The issue of ethnicity has been in the forefront in nation formation in the newly created Central Asian republics.

The region has a complex ethnic composition, with ethnicity transcending international borders. The ethnic composition of the Central Asian states is as given at Table 2.

History of the region indicates that probably Iranians were the earliest inhabitants of Central Asia, whose descendents today live in parts of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Subsequently, Turkic nomads conquered the plains, with some intermingling with the Iranian community, who are the fore bearers of the present Uzbek community, while some others followed the nomad style, whose descendents are the Kazakh, Kyrgys and Turkmen people.

Each of the ethnic communities is further sub-divided into clan and tribal loyalties. A cluster of families formed a clan, and a cluster of clans formed a tribe, headed by a Khan. The tribes were patriarchal in nature, and followed a strict loyalty code; in addition, regional affiliations also formed an important element of the society. The nomads followed a strict code of genealogy, where bloodlines were important. However, genealogy was not as important in the settled people.

In 1920, none of the three states of Khiva, Bukhara and Russian Turkistan had a clear majority for any of the nationalities, except for the Uzbeks in one. "Bukhara had Uzbeks 50.7%, Tajiks 31.65% and Turkmen's 10.3%, with smaller numbers of Kazakh, Kyrgys, Karakalpaks, Arabs and others. Turkistan had 46.4% Uzbeks, 19.4 Kazakhs, 10.7% Kyrgys, 9.5% Russians and 7.7% Tajiks. The Uzbeks, Kazakhs and Turkmen inhabited all the three states."<sup>25</sup>

Political legitimacy in Central Asia has always demanded persuasion, which task was performed by literature, during the 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Timurids had soon spread to all parts of Central Asia, establishing a very recognisable political and cultural identity. Legitimacy

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.18.

<sup>24</sup> Shams-ud-Din, "The Ethnic and Religious Revivalism in Central Asia" in Shams-ud-Din, ed., *Nationalism in Russia and Central Asian Republics*, New Delhi: Lancers Books, 1999, pp. 189-194, p. 189.

<sup>25</sup> Sengupta, Anita, "Decolonisation, Transition and the Imperatives of Territorial Delimitation in Central Asia", *The Journal of Central Asian Studies*, Vol. XI, 2000, pp. 1-29, p. 14-15.

**TABLE 2**  
**ETHNIC COMPOSITION: CENTRAL ASIA**

| <u>State/Ethnicity</u>   | <u>Percentage Population</u> |             |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|-------------|
|                          | <u>1989</u>                  | <u>1999</u> |
| <b><u>Kazakhstan</u></b> |                              |             |
| • Kazakhs                | 39.7                         | 53.4        |
| • Russians               | 37.8                         | 30.0        |
| • Germans                | 5.8                          | 2.4         |
| • Uzbeks                 | 5.4                          | 2.5         |
| • Tatars                 | 2.0                          | 1.7         |
| • Uighurs                | 1.1                          | 1.4         |
| • Koreans                | 0.6                          | 0.7         |
| • Ukrainians             |                              | 3.7         |
| • Belarusian             | 7.6                          | 0.7         |
| • Azeri                  |                              | 0.5         |
| • Turkish                |                              | 0.5         |
| • Others                 |                              | 2.7         |
| <b><u>Kyrgystan</u></b>  |                              |             |
| • Kyrgys                 | 52.4                         | 64.9        |
| • Russians               | 21.5                         | 12.5        |
| • Uzbeks                 | 12.9                         | 13.8        |
| • Kazakh                 |                              | 0.9         |
| • Uigur                  |                              | 1.0         |
| • Tatars                 |                              | 0.9         |
| • Koreans                |                              | 0.4         |
| • Ukrainians             |                              | 1.0         |
| • Belarusian             | 13.2                         | 0           |
| • Azeri                  |                              | 0           |
| • Turkish                |                              | 0.7         |
| • Others                 |                              | 2.6         |

| <u>Tajikistan</u>       | <u>1989</u> | <u>1999</u> |
|-------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| • Tajiks                | 62.3        | 63.7        |
| • Russians              | 7.6         | 7.6         |
| • Uzbeks                | 23.5        | 23.5        |
| • Others                | 6.6         | 5.2         |
| <br><u>Turkmenistan</u> |             |             |
| • Turkmen               | 72.0        | 73.3        |
| • Russians              | 9.5         | 9.8         |
| • Uzbeks                | 9.0         | 9.0         |
| • Kazakh                |             | 2.0         |
| • Tatar                 | 9.5         | 0.9         |
| • Azeri                 |             | 0.8         |
| • Others                |             | 7.1         |
| <br><u>Uzbekistan</u>   |             |             |
| • Uzbeks                | 71.4        | 71.5        |
| • Tajiks                | 4.7         | 4.6         |
| • Russians              | 8.3         | 8.3         |
| • Kazakhs               | 4.1         | 4.1         |
| • Tatars                | 11.5        | 2.4         |
| • Others                |             | 9.1         |

Sources:

1. Smith, Graham, Vivien Law, Andrew Wilson, Annette Boln, and Edward Allworth, ed., *Nation Building in the Post Soviet Borderlands*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp 293, p. 153.
2. *The Europa World Year Book*, London: Europa Publications, 2002, 43<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Volume II.

was thus transferred from the Chengisids to the Timurids. Taimur succeeded in his military campaigns, but did not succeed in his social organisational attempts in creating a social order loyal to himself, as he had waged campaigns to force a unity under his rule. Thus, the confederation he created did not survive, as the tribals had not come together voluntarily. They had been coerced to join the confederation through force of arms, and not by persuasion.

The question of legitimacy again came to the fore after the region came under the sway of the Russians. The local population had resisted the Russian southward expansion fiercely during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, then in 1916 and again during the Lenin and Stalin eras. The present Central Asian states had been an artificial creation of the Russians, and their ethnic basis lacked legitimacy. A sudden independence to these states forced the ruling elite to look for political legitimacy inwards, and not towards Moscow as had been the case earlier. This tendency has resulted in each state trying to dig out its past and create its own distinct history. Literature has been used as a weapon for this purpose. Earlier, a similar effort had been made by the Soviet regime to manipulate Central Asian history through literature, which was fiercely contested by the Central Asian writers. "The inhabitants' collective ability to withhold legitimacy has been the basis of Central Asia's primary challenge to an invader. The Tsarist expansion claimed a 'civilising mission', while the Soviet rule emphasised 'progressive significance' in industrial political and cultural terms."<sup>26</sup> However, legitimacy from the Central Asian people largely eluded the Russians. The local population had deeply resented any Russian settlement in their traditional areas. Folklore had glorified and preserved the heroic deeds of people during these periods of resistance, which also created certain national icons.

Nationalism is a historical term and it takes time to be embedded deeply in the society. The five Central Asian states were created artificially during the Soviet regime by dissolving the Khanates of Khiva, Bukhara and Kokand and Russian Turkistan. Going back into history, one realises that purely national states have never existed in Central Asia. The break up of USSR has resulted in the creation of nation states there, for the first time. The demarcation lines of these states have been arbitrary, cutting across national ethnic entities, laying grounds for several sub-regional ethnic conflicts. The national borders of cultural and ethnic settlement transcend state boundaries; and the complex ethnic, cultural, religious and

linguistic situation in the region may precipitate an intensive regional conflict, aimed at the revision of inter state boundaries. As the Tsarist Russian occupation was also not very old, the old loyalties of clan and tribe and affiliations to principalities continued to linger even after the 1917 revolution. Therefore, for the Communist party to succeed in the Central Asian traditional society, it had to root itself in ethnic nationalism and tribal or clan loyalties. For that matter, even Islamic revivalism in the 80s and 90s had to do the same.

“The peoples of the region are affected by two complementary motives: one, the desire to be recognized as a responsible group of people; and two, the desire to build an efficient and dynamic modern state.”<sup>27</sup> The first aim is a search for national identity, and the second for better living conditions. While searching for national identity, past becomes essential; and any forays into past traditions, customs, myths etc. looking for national heroes, do not in any way signify a return to the past. It is a part of the quest for historical roots, which every nation has attempted at some time or the other.

After the break up of Soviet Union, the Central Asians could comfortably relate themselves to either the Timurid or Chengisid rules or to the heroes of resistance to Russian dominance. Therefore, there is a subtle anti-Russian feeling in any effort to gain political legitimacy and national revivalism, without which it may not sound genuine to the populace. Considering the above, all the Central Asian states decided to rewrite history, especially of the Russian period. The Russian perception that their incorporation in the Soviet state was voluntary was negated, and a reassessment of historical events was carried out. The glorification of the leaders of the 1916 rebellion, the Basmachi rebellion, anti-collectivisation efforts, resistance to Tsarist expansion etc. was carried out. Details of numerous casualties suffered during the collectivisation campaign were published.

The populace also understands that their current leadership was installed not through the will of the people, but by Moscow, whose political character has been different. “Presently, there are two prominent trends, closely intertwined with each other. These are: nature, ideological orientation and legitimacy of the current leadership; and recovery of historical identity by the masses in the light of the present.”<sup>28</sup> These two issues will remain in

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<sup>26</sup> Paksoy, H. B., “Political Legitimacy Trends in Central Asia”, on website <http://www.ku.edu/~ibetext/texts/paksoy-6/index.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Agadjanian, Alexander, “Revising Pandora’s Gifts: Religious and National Identity in the Post-Soviet Societal Fabric”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 3, 2001, pp. 473-488, p. 474.

<sup>28</sup> Paksoy, H. B., n. 26.

serious contention for some time to come, and their outcome will influence the attributes of emerging Central Asian society and polity.

The Soviet central leadership had also attempted to create new political groupings, by fostering the smallest possible identities. Data was bent to prove that the language spoken by different groups was entirely different and distinct. Each group was considered as a distinct and unrelated entity, even when all these groups can speak to each other without any difficulty. Each republic thus created was provided a leadership that was trained in Moscow, and whose legitimacy emerged from the centre. These leaders had to do the bidding of Moscow, while at the same time keep the local populace in good humour, which involved a serious balancing act. The same leadership became 'nationalist' overnight, as USSR disintegrated, further increasing the gap between the leadership and the people, as the hopes of the latter were not realised. The ruling elite are unwilling to give up the perks they have enjoyed under the Soviet system. Some of these leaders have had to "create private 'enforcement' squads to protect their own status and substantial private income."<sup>29</sup> In most of these states, the opposition has assembled under the umbrella of 'popular fronts', while the governments have been exercising strict control over print media, with unofficial papers not being free. The opposition had spread contraband cassettes to send their message to the people. Those leaders of the opposition, who have "refused to compromise themselves to comply with the ruling leadership's requirements, were dumped, some killed, others roughed up, some others exiled."<sup>30</sup>

In spite of the coercive methods used by the governments, the question of legitimacy has remained in the minds of the populace. The opposition and ruling elite, both are making efforts to use historic personalities, the resistance movement during the Tsarist period, and the fight against Communist control to create legitimacy for themselves. This political confrontation is likely to continue simultaneous with the efforts to transform the society and state to a different level of development. However, the inherent contradictions in the society and the existence of weak state institutions are likely to lead to greater instability within each state and within the broader regional framework.

### *Kazakhstan*

Kazakhstan, which started the protests in Central Asia against central rule, through riots in Alma Ata in 1986, has to contend with a Russian population almost at par with the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Kazakhs. It also has considerable regional disparities between the Slav dominated North and the Kazakh South. The Kazakh President, Nursultan Nazarbayev has had a dramatic transformation from an apparatchik to a nationalist leader. He has to maintain a delicate balance, as asserting Kazakh nationalism too strongly would alienate his Slav constituency, and open the way for wider ethnic tensions. The Northern region of Kazakhstan as well as its capital Almaty are predominantly Russian, while the Southern part of the state is primarily Kazakh, as a result of historical settlement patterns. Kazakhs feel this is the biggest danger their state faces: if the Russians are dissatisfied with the state, they may opt to become part of Russia. Therefore, the government tries to avoid inter-ethnic friction. The President is a Kazakh, while the Prime Minister is Russian, and the Kazakhs hold most of the key ministries like defence, and foreign affairs. The government has been encouraging Kazakh immigration from other neighbouring states, and encouraging more and more Kazakhs to settle down in Russian dominated Northern region to alter the ethnic balance in favour of Kazakhs over a period of time.

### Kyrgystan

Kyrgystan too has an extremely complex ethnic composition, where Kyrgys comprise only about 60 percent of the population, with strong Russian and Uzbek minorities. Uzbeks and Kyrgys live in different townships in Southern Kyrgystan, attending separate schools and mosques. The Uzbek population in Osh remains unrepresented in the Kyrgys political process. The militant activities carried out by IMU cadre in Kyrgystan in 1999, 2000 and 2001 have attracted world attention to the state; the international community having neglected Kyrgystan till then. Aid started flowing from Russia, USA and China. Some Kyrgys elements have also been joining the extremist elements of late, which is a serious concern as the Kyrgys people are reported to be least conscious of conservative Islam. This itself is demonstrative of the seriousness of the economic situation there. There is also a strong divide between the people from the Northern and Southern valleys. Asker Akaev, a staunch anti-communist, became President during the elections in Oct 1990. "Akaev has expressed admiration for liberal economic democratic principles, taking Kyrgystan closest to representing a democratic state modelled along Western lines. His regime's success or failure, though largely depends on economic stability and progress."<sup>31</sup> However, he has been

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Hexamer, Eva-Maria, "Some Aspects of Transformation in Post-Communist Societies of Central Asia", in Shams-ud-Din, ed., n. 24, pp. 201-222, p. 210.



showing disregard for democratic values since 1995, and has been functioning in a more autocratic manner than before.

### Tajikistan

Tajikistan lacks a national centre of power. At the time of break up of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan had a weak sense of national unity, the state lacking the capacity to enforce its will, provide effective governance and resolve conflicts. It was a state where people most identified themselves with their region or mahalla or family. The regional disparities and regional or clan interests led to a power struggle, eventually resulting in a full-fledged civil war. Tajikistan has serious ethnic problems, arising out of lop-sided development. While the Northern region around Khojent is an industrial centre with both Tajik and Uzbek communities living side by side, the valleys in Central Tajikistan and the eastern province of Garm-Badakhshan are neglected. The Kulyab tribe in the South East developed strong ties with the Khojent based ruling elite, antagonising the Garm and Kurgan tribes, who then supported the opposition.

Violence broke out in the state as a result of these contradictions, with regional resentment at being left out being the main reason for the conflict to erupt. The ex-Communists under President Nabiyeu managed to hold on to power with the support of the Russian Army, against the oppositionists organised under the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). The civil war was not so much between 'Communists' and 'Islamists', but more of a settling of accounts between the ruling group of Khojent and Kulyab tribes against the Garm and Pamir tribes.

The civil war, when it broke out in 1990, provided the first direct evidence of the potential mobilising power of political Islam. The conflict caused alarm in the neighbouring states, with Uzbekistan expressing particular concern, as Islamist parties helped the opposition group. Karimov feared similar unrest in the Fergana Valley, and sought to encourage Russia to intervene in the fighting. Uzbekistan was particularly sensitive to the spread of Islamic Fundamentalism; and with Uzbek and Russian help, the ex-Communists were able to throw back the democratic opposition into the inaccessible Pamir Mountains. After years of fighting, an accord – General Agreement on Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan - was signed between the warring factions in Jun 1997, resulting in the creation of the National Reconciliation Council, granting 30 percent of the government posts to the opposition. The political accord has remained tenuous but held on despite efforts to the contrary by vested interests.

### Uzbekistan

The Uzbeks are the most nationalist of all the ethnic communities of Central Asia. They founded the Uzbek Shaybani Empire in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and were part of the Jadid reform movement in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. “The most aggressive, numerous and influential of all Central Asian groups, Uzbeks also form substantial minorities in Tajikistan (23%), Turkmenistan (13%), Kyrgystan (13%). In addition, some two million Uzbeks live in Afghanistan.”<sup>32</sup> Uzbekistan has been following a policy of coercion with its neighbours, with steps like cutting off gas supplies to Kyrgystan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan to pressurise them, and declaring protection to the Uzbek Diaspora in other regional states.

Uzbekistan has also been affected by Birlik activity promoting Uzbek language and culture and extracting a number of concessions from the government. It was permitted to register as a political movement in Oct 1991, but not as a political party. Uzbek President Islam Karimov, a former apparatchik, was one of the first to register his nationalist credentials in 1991. However, he has a strong dislike for democracy and an equally strong desire to retain power in the hands of the nomenclatura. The political power in the state is defined along tribal and clan lines.

Karimov banned both the opposition parties – Birlik and Erk in 1992, forcing their leaders into exile. He then targeted the Islamic fundamentalist groups – arresting “hundreds of ordinary pious Muslims for alleged links with Islamic fundamentalists, accusing them of being Wahhabis, closing down mosques and madarsas, and jailing or exiling mullahs.”<sup>33</sup> The US has ignored the dismal human rights record of Uzbekistan, and has been evincing keen interest in the state since 1996, increasing its investments there. After the September 11, 2001 attacks, USA has set aside its concerns for human rights and democracy in Uzbekistan, increasing its strategic and economic involvement there, taking into account the geo-political and geo-strategic importance of the state and US concerns regarding Islamic fundamentalism, and Russian, Chinese and Iranian influence in Central Asia. Uzbekistan offers some key advantages to foreign investors like a strategic location, trained work force and abundant natural resources especially precious metals and uranium.

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<sup>32</sup> Ahmed Rashid, n. 13, p. 78.

<sup>33</sup> Ahmed Rashid, n. 13, p. 84.

### Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan, the most balanced at the time of independence, possesses the highest degree of cohesiveness with regard to social and political structures. Turkmenistan is the most homogenous of all the Central Asian states, with more than 70% of its 4.7 million population being Turkmen. They have more than 20 tribes, but leadership is provided by the two largest tribes – Tekke and Yomut. However, delicate balancing is required between the five main tribes present, which is being ensured to a large degree by the current regime, ensuring peace in the state.

The old apparatchik has retained its stranglehold over power. It has concluded bilateral security agreements with Russia, thus taking care of the traditional fears of threat from Iran, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. The state has had no ethnic tensions. It follows a strict personality cult of its President Niyazov, whose regime is the most repressive regime in Central Asia – no political parties, a state controlled media, strict censorship, indiscriminate arrests and executions, a ban on all foreign influences even teaching of English in schools, to keep the Turkmen away from Western influence. It maintains a strictly neutral policy – equidistant from all powers.

### Development of National Identity

Various theories and ideas about possible geopolitical scenarios in the region and the world at large have been forwarded. According to one school of thought, “future world politics will be influenced by civilisational conflict. Another theory forecasts the emergence of a Greater Central Asia, which will be facilitated by new technology, particularly by improvements in the transport and communication systems. Yet another school of thought believes that the Central Asian states face the grim prospect of fragmentation on account of deeply ingrained tribal-ethnic loyalties. However, all these theories conveniently ignore the basic geopolitical fact of the modern day world – the rise of the nation-states.”<sup>34</sup> The nation-states that today constitute Central Asia are slowly inching towards acquiring the symbols of nation-states, and they are formulating the future course of their relations with other states based on the specificity of each state’s societal, economic and political structure and its security perceptions.

The first major factor to be considered for the development of national identity is the

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<sup>34</sup> Shams-ud-Din, n. 18, p. 334

ethnic diversity and mixture in almost all countries of Central Asia, adding to the volatility of the region. To take a few examples, the Uzbeks constitute about 23.5 percent of the population of Tajikistan, 13.8 percent of Kyrgyzstan and nine percent of Turkmenistan. There are also 4.6 percent Tajiks and 4.1 percent Kazakhs in Uzbekistan, besides Germans and Ukrainians in some numbers in the region. Complicating the ethnic situation substantially is the sizeable Russian population in the region. For further details refer Table 2. Although there was an exodus of ethnic Russians to Russia during the period of turmoil, a sizeable number remains. The ethnic mosaic is a serious source of instability and conflict.

Though these states are all multi-ethnic in nature in spite of their names, all of them have been striving to look for a source of national identity, after the collapse of a common Soviet identity. The nomenclatura of the Soviet era has continued to rule in these states, which is averse to the use of religion as a source of national identity, as the religious revivalist forces would soon overtake them in the process. Therefore, the ethnicity factor, as created by the Soviet regime, distinctly defining each ethnic group, has been found to be an ideal platform for such a national identity. Thus, the ethno-religious resurgence observed in the Central Asian region is merely a manifestation of, and drive to establish and consolidate distinct national identity in each republic. It may take the form of intra-state or inter-state conflict and political instability, if not handled with care and if the ruling elite do not exercise caution. "The two prerequisites for ethnic mobilisation - a strong group identity and discrimination on communal/ethnic grounds"<sup>35</sup> are present in varying degrees in all the Central Asian states. However, the continuity of leadership from the Soviet era has allowed the leaders to contain or suppress potential ethnic disputes. This continuity has been mainly maintained through the intelligentsia in these states.

"Their intelligentsia can be categorised into three categories. The most numerous group comprises mainly the rural members of the educated classes, mostly born in towns and villages who follow a traditional patriarchal structure. Members of this group find Russian culture as alien. They have settled down in urban centres. The second group, the least numerous, comprises the urban intelligentsia, who regard Russo-Central Asian culture as their own and are estranged from their own culture. The third group have assimilated both cultures to an equal degree, being generally of rural origin, but educated in Russian language schools. They are characterised by ethno-cultural and linguistic dualism. In drafting

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<sup>35</sup> Jones, Scott A., n. 1, p. 8.

nationalising policies, the contemporary Central Asian leaders are guided principally by the members of the first, as well as a certain number of members of the third group.”<sup>36</sup>

The same people mostly comprise the state apparatus, championing the cause for a nation state. They justify their actions as measures to undo the injustice done during the Soviet regime, and redress grievances of the titular ethnic population. Kazakhstan and Kyrgystan, who do not have clear-cut ethnic majority, have difficulty in pursuing such nationalising agenda, while in the other three states the parliaments merely act as rubber stamps while enacting such laws. The titular elites are also pursuing this line as a means to fortify the integrity of the titular nations themselves, which has been undermined to some extent by clan, mahalla and family ties and loyalties. The governments also adopt welfare activities that help develop such nationalism, by giving special financial assistance to such schemes as ‘mahalla’ development schemes, which are unique only to the indigenous ethnic communities.

In addition, all the Central Asian states have tried to develop symbols of nation-state that assist in creating a unified distinctive nation. “The state flags of the new Central Asian states contain carefully selected symbols specific to the titular nation’s culture.”<sup>37</sup> Mythological history is another element of national ideology. However, one problem remains to be tackled, i.e., reconciliation of the desire to create a distinctly national ideology, which draws on the history and culture of the titular people, and the nationalist aspirations of the other ethnic groups.

They have also placed great emphasis on the revival of national customs, re-writing of their history specific to the role and genealogy of the titular group, reinvention of traditions and rehabilitation of national heroes. Language laws have been re-framed, making the local language as the official language, especially in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Kazakhstan and Kyrgystan have adopted dual language policy because of large Russian population. The Central Asian states have also gone in for major change of names of places, villages and streets etc. from Russian and Soviet ones to indigenous ones. Uzbekistan has been in the forefront in this, and has tried to remove all traces of Russian language from the state. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have also gone in for placing “greater emphasis on affirming the historical existence of the (titular) nation by ensuring continuity between

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<sup>36</sup> Smith, Graham, Vivien Law, Andrew Wilson, Annette Boln, and Edward Allworth, *Nation Building in the Post Soviet Borderlands*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 293, p. 140.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 145.

modernisation and the older ethnic communities from which they believe they stem.”<sup>38</sup>

The state apparatus and the ruling class have been indigenised in favour of the titular ethnic groups. Land laws, allotment of government land, privatisation etc. have been carried out in a manner as to give a clear preferential treatment to the indigenous people. Kazakhstan has followed a policy of consolidating the hold of the titular community over the Northern region, presently having a Russian majority, by measures such as preferential allotment of land to Kazakhs, shifting of capital to the Northern region, and in-migration of Kazakhs from other countries. Three million Kazakhs live elsewhere in Russia, China, Mongolia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Approximately, two lakh in-migrations have taken place, though this pace has now slackened because of problems being faced by these people in Kazakhstan.

Simultaneous with the formation of a new national identity in each of the nation-states, the formation of a new Central Asian identity requiring a complete re-evaluation of the frontiers of Asia, close to the traditional Central Asian identity including Afghanistan, Iran, the Central Asian states, and Western China as a geopolitical region is emerging. However, it is still in its infancy, and may take a long time.

With Muslims being the titular people in all the states, Islam is regarded as an essential component of a new ‘national ideology’. State authorities are giving greater prominence to religion, with clerics being invited to take part in state events, new mosques and madaras opened and restrictions on hajj pilgrimage lifted. However, their intention is not to create an Islamic theocratic state. The constitutions of all the Central Asian states stress separation of religion and state. Activities of the Muslim communities are kept under constant surveillance. Other established religions are also treated with respect.

In the meantime, “ethnicity and factionalism appear to be re-shaping in Central Asia, where the process of developing national identity along ethnic lines is just under way. Presently, local loyalties, patron-client relationship, tribalism and factionalism based on geographic origins are slowing and hampering the general reshuffling along ethnic, religious and linguistic lines.”<sup>39</sup> Moreover, “the ethno-national instability in the region, combined with the missing historical identities, and continuance of the dominion over the new states by the previous ruling elite puts a question mark behind the subscription to the emergence of nation states in Central Asia.”<sup>40</sup> A developing multi-ethnic country, the model that fits all the Central Asian states, strives for achieving a national identity. For the ruling elite, it implies

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 146.

<sup>39</sup> Hexamer, Eva-Maria, n. 31, p. 201-202.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 204.

converting the existing state into a nation state, while for the opposition, it may mean breaking the monopoly of the ruling elite through any means, including fundamentalist Islamist ideologies. In most cases the problem is that the ruling elite is from one or a group of dominant tribe(s)/clan(s), while the under-privileged tribes and clans seek the path of fundamentalism to gain legitimacy.

As can be seen, the five Central Asian states are still fragile and yet to evolve strong structures necessary for stable nation states. The fragmented structure of these states is indicative of less likelihood of a comprehensive Islamic fundamentalist block emerging in the region. "Currently, these states have four options:-

- Preservation of individual identities as sovereign states.
- Collective development as one political and economic entity.
- Realignment to external powers.
- Development of a new economic block."<sup>41</sup>

The region may in the long term turn into a structural region, like the creation of an economic block/region along with certain successful economies of the neighbourhood; a political region espousing power interests, like an Islamic block; or an ethnic region/ethnic domination. Military-strategic alignments in the region are also possible.

### **Politics of Energy**

#### **Oil and Gas Prospects**

The region has one of the largest oil and natural resources reserves in the world, and is therefore the centre of attraction for geopolitical rivalry of all the major powers of the world and the region. While considering the hydrocarbon resources, it is imperative that the integrated region encompassing Central Asia and the Caspian Sea is considered. The Caspian Sea is the largest inland sea in the world, and is larger than the Baltic Sea and the Persian Gulf. The sea is shallow in the Northern region, bordering Kazakhstan and Russia with a depth of up to 25 metres; reaches a depth of 170-790 metres in the central section, bordering Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan; and, is the deepest in the Southern section, bordering Turkmenistan and Iran. The Caspian Sea has great economic and strategic significance. In addition to significant hydrocarbon reserves, it has a variety of commercially viable fish species, and is an important maritime alternative to overland cargo routes between Russia and

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 215.

the Middle East. The proven oil and gas reserves for the region at the end of 2001 are as given at Table 3.

**TABLE 3**  
**OIL AND GAS RESERVES – CENTRAL ASIA**

| <b>Country</b>      | <b><u>Estimated</u><br/>Proven Reserves:<br/>Oil<br/>(1000 bbl)</b> | <b><u>Estimated</u><br/>Proven<br/>Reserves: Gas<br/>(bcf)</b> | <b><u>Oil</u><br/>Production<br/>(1000 b/d)</b> |
|---------------------|---|--|---|
| <b>Uzbekistan</b>   | <b>594000</b>   | <b>66200</b>   | <b>155</b>                                      |
| <b>Tajikistan</b>   | <b>12000</b>  | <b>200</b>   | <b>0</b>  |
| <b>Kyrgystan</b>    | <b>40000</b>  | <b>200</b>   | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>Kazakhstan</b>   | <b>5417000</b>  | <b>65000</b>   | <b>675</b>                                      |
| <b>Turkmenistan</b> | <b>546000</b>   | <b>101000</b>  | <b>140</b>                                      |
| <b>Azerbaijan</b>   | <b>1178000</b>  | <b>4400</b>  | <b>5.9</b>                                      |
| <b>Saudi Arabia</b> | <b>259250000</b>  | <b>219000</b>  | <b>7995</b>                                     |
| <b>Iran</b>         | <b>89700000</b>   | <b>812300</b>  | <b>3681.7</b>                                   |
| <b>India</b>        | <b>4840150</b>  | <b>22865</b>   | <b>646</b>                                      |

Source: *The Europa World Year Book*, London: Europa Publications, 2002, 43<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Volume II.

Petroleum and gas reserves in Russian and Iranian sectors of the Caspian Sea were said to be limited. It is quite evident that the Central Asian republics of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan are sitting on one of the world's largest oil and gas reserves. Despite these vast resources, their current energy production is miniscule in comparison to what could be pumped over the next few decades. All these republics are in dire need of foreign capital and modern technology due to poor infrastructure and low level of production. Furthermore, their landlocked status forces them to find other ways and means of reaching consumer markets. Huge foreign capital requirement in the coming decades will be necessary to enable them to extract and export their natural resources to potential markets.

The geopolitics of new reserves and the implications of enormous Western investments in the region are certainly going to have a major impact on the future of the region in the decades to come. However, investment potential of the findings also relate to



the potential, probable and possible reserves that are available, and the amount that can be considered as recoverable. The demand side of the equation and the global oil and gas prices also need to be kept in mind. The oil and gas reserves potential of the Central Asian states will remain a strategic focal point for the world and regional powers in the years ahead. We will now have a brief look at the existing status of oil exploration and extraction, pipeline networks and potential investment in each of the states.

### *Azerbaijan*

Azerbaijan has signed deals with major corporations for oil exploration on its territory. It concluded an agreement with Malaysia for the development of three large offshore petroleum and gas deposits in 1996. Exploration and production sharing agreement for oilfields in the Nebitdag region was also signed with a UK firm. Other smaller deals were also signed with Argentine and Russian companies. Azerbaijan has two oil pipelines – one through Russia, and the other through Georgia to the Black Sea.

### *Kazakhstan*

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan was the first and most significant recipient of foreign investment among the CIS countries in the hydrocarbon sector. A joint venture was established with Chevron in Mar 92, for the development of Tenghiz oilfield. Caspian Shelf Consortium, later re-designated as North Caspian Project Consortium, a seven-member group consisting of Agip, British Gas, British Petroleum, Mobil, Royal Dutch/Shell, Statoil of France and Total of France, was given a contract for exploring 100,000 sq. km of Kazakh section of the Caspian Sea. China has been given exclusive negotiating rights for the second largest Uzen oilfield, by the Government of Kazakhstan. A Spanish company in partnership with a British company was given exploring rights in another oilfield in North West Kazakhstan. ONGC was given exploration rights over 10,000 sq. km in the Pavlodar Basin. These deals coupled with major offshore oil discoveries in the year 2000 have given enough grounds for Kazakhstan to believe that it will one of the top oil producers in the world by 2010.

Kazakhstan's main oilfields are close to the Russian border, with its only existing pipeline running through Russia, making it economically dependent on the latter. A deal has been signed with Chevron, France's Mobil and Russia's Lubeil for the development of a pipeline to the Russian port of Novorossiysk on the Black Sea. Another agreement has been signed with China for laying pipelines for export of oil to that country. Kazakhstan has faced

difficulties with pipeline routes. However, crude was delivered to Novorossiysk and Batumi ports by oil tankers in the Black Sea, and it supplied crude oil to Azerbaijan for its processing for local use; while Azeri oil of a similar amount was exported via Batumi. Kazakhstan is carrying out feasibility study for under-sea pipeline in the Caspian Sea. "It has also been supplying crude oil to Iran for its internal consumption in Northern Iran, while Iran makes an equivalent amount of crude available at its ports in the Persian Gulf to Kazakhstan for export."<sup>42</sup> Export of oil to China by rail was also commenced in 1997. Existing Soviet era pipelines are being extensively used for transportation of oil, accounting for 95 percent of the traffic. With the discovery of large amount of petroleum reserves in Caspian Sea, Kazakhstan has been viewing the alternative pipeline routes via Turkey and Iran with interest.

### Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan has limited number of pipelines through Russia. As a result of Russia limiting transportation of Turkmen energy, the latter has been forced to look for alternatives. Possible routes are through Afghanistan to Pakistan and another through Iran. Turkmenistan has been slower in attracting direct foreign investment. As the CIS members were unable to make payments for its oil and gas, Turkmenistan was forced to look elsewhere for markets. Several projects have been considered, but most were long term with limited scope for implementation in the near future. It has planned for its gas pipelines through Iran, China and Afghanistan, in addition to the Turk-Azeri route. "A 1400 KM gas pipeline was planned along the Turkmenistan-Iran-Turkey-Western Europe route, and construction was commenced in 1994. The Turkmenistan-Iran segment was completed in 1997. USA has also dropped its objection to this route. Construction of the balance route is yet to commence."<sup>43</sup> Japan's Mitsubishi group has formed a consortium in collaboration with Exxon and China National Petroleum Company in 1997, to develop a pilot project for Trans-Asia gas pipeline, to connect gas fields in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan with China's Pacific coast, via Kazakhstan and Mainland China, an estimated length of 6130 KM, at an estimated cost of \$9500 million. Gas could thereafter be supplied to Japan and Korea. The project was technically viable, but the long distance and difficult geographic conditions made it extremely costly.

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<sup>42</sup> Akiner, Shirin, "Politics of Energy in the Caspian Sea Region," *Regional Survey of the World – Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 2002*, London: Europa Publications, 2001, pp. 638, p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

### Uzbekistan

It has the least amount of infrastructure to exploit its vast gas resources. The existing network of pipelines runs to the CIS countries.

### Foreign Investment

Though foreign investment in oil and gas has been considerable, exploitation has proceeded more slowly than had initially been anticipated, partly due to unanticipated technical obstacles and problems associated with weak local infrastructure. “Three main reasons can be ascribed to this phenomenon: disputes over the legal status of the Caspian Sea, lack of adequate export facilities, and regional instability. Rampant corruption, archaic legal system, ambiguous and at times contradictory laws and regulations, and a general lack of familiarity with Western business practises created an environment not very conducive for smooth functioning of agreements, further compounded by an unusually low price of oil in the late 1990s.”<sup>44</sup>

### Legal Status of Caspian Sea

Till the break up of the Soviet Union, Russia and Iran were the only littoral states of the Caspian Sea. The Iran-Soviet Friendship Treaty of 1921 granted equal rights of access to the Sea to both countries, superseding the Gulistan Pact (1813) and the Treaty of Turkamanchai (1828), which had allowed exclusive right to Russia to maintain a fleet of warships in the Sea. However, even after 1921, Russia continued to play a major role, given the asymmetry of strength of the two countries, and the fact that USSR controlled all but the Southern periphery of the coast. The questions of ‘national sovereignty’ and legal status of the Sea were never raised between the two countries, as no such need for delimitation was felt.

Break up of Soviet Union in 1991 added three new littoral states – Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Due to their disrupted economies, these states saw economic exploitation of the rich offshore hydrocarbon reserves of the Caspian Sea as the only solution to their deepening economic crisis. However, lack of clarity regarding the status of the Sea as well as lack of agreement between the five littoral states regarding the type of legal regime that should apply has prevented this exploitation. “Earlier, Iran and the USSR had followed the condominium type of model of joint use and joint sovereignty. Both Russia and Iran

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

favoured a continuation of this approach. However, such a regime would ensure the domination of Russia, with its superior forces, and exclude Western oil companies from any exploitation of resources, reducing the other states to junior partners to Russia and Iran. This was not acceptable to the other three littoral states, and they asked for a demarcation of the Sea into national sectors.”<sup>45</sup>

After protracted negotiations, a preliminary agreement was reached between all the states except Azerbaijan in Nov 1996, on the partial division of the Sea into national sectors, each extending to 75 KM from the coast, with the middle of the Sea preserved as a common economic zone, shared equally between littoral states. No fresh unilateral projects for exploitation of hydrocarbon reserves in the central sectors could be taken up, while the existing ones were allowed to continue.

Growing militarisation of the Sea by late 1990s has been a cause of worry for the littoral states. A row over offshore oil exploration erupted between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan soon thereafter; tensions between the two states persisting ever since. In 1999, Turkmenistan decreed the establishment of ‘national service’ for the development of the Turkmen sector of the Sea, proclaimed as an inalienable part of Turkmenistan. It evoked angry protests from Russia, who declared that recognition of national sovereignty over waters of the Sea cannot be given till its legal status is decided, warning of ‘adequate measures’ to ensure compliance.

Kazakhstan raised the issue of settling the legal status of the Sea in the UN General Assembly in 1998. However, little progress has been made since. By 2001, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Russia had reached a common standpoint that the seabed should be divided but the surface used in common. Turkmenistan continued to argue for division into national sectors. Iran, in turn, while rejecting Turkmen proposal, demanded an equal division of the seabed and the surface of the sea into national sectors, with each state holding 20 percent. However, there are indications of a modification of Iranian position of late. “Division of seabed and sub sea resources into national sectors, leaving the surface as an international waterway, would provide the right of shipping to the littoral states. However, if the sea surface was divided into national sectors, Russia and Kazakhstan would lose their passage to Iran; simultaneously, Russia and Turkmenistan would lose sharing a common border. Only Azerbaijan would retain a common border with all the littoral states, thereby remaining a key

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

conduit for trade and pipeline routes.”<sup>46</sup>

Meanwhile, severe environmental degradation of the Sea forced the littoral states to adopt a comprehensive plan to reduce pollution levels and to draw up a balanced and sustainable plan for the use of biological resources of the Sea. A Draft Environmental Security Convention was agreed upon in Apr 2000, the acceptance of which would hinge on the final agreement on the legal status of the Sea.

### **Politics of Pipeline**

Exploitation of hydrocarbon resources of the region needs pipelines to carry the output to the potential markets. At the time of the break up of the Soviet Union, the only route for oil and gas to the outside world led through Russia, as the region was linked to the internal Soviet network. Therefore, Russia tried to exert political and economic pressure on the newly independent states, which was unacceptable to these states and was not conducive for induction of foreign capital. The foreign investors wanted an export outlet without interference from Russia. The other alternatives that are being considered actively are via Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan/Pakistan.

However, a large number of problems persist along these alternate routes, prominent ones being: distance from world markets and high costs of such projects, longer distances over which pipelines needed to be laid, environmental problems related to the use of the Bosphorus Straits for petroleum export, regional instability in the Caucasus and Afghanistan, and US sanctions against Iran. The possible ports for export of oil and gas from the region are on the Black Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Arabian Sea. A number of routes to these ports were proposed, but very few have progressed beyond the stage of preliminary feasibility studies and memoranda of intent. These are considered in succeeding paragraphs.

### **The Black Sea Routes**

The Black Sea provides a shorter route than the Mediterranean one, and the Turkish authorities are bound by the 1936 Montreaux Convention to allow free passage to shipping. However, environmental degradation has reached alarming levels, mainly due to oil tanker traffic. Therefore, Turkey has imposed certain restrictions over the number of oil tankers moving through the Bosphorus Straits. The other routes available are via Grozny -

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<sup>46</sup> Alam, Shah, "Pipeline Politics in the Caspian Basin", *Strategic Analysis*, Jan-Mar 2002, pp. 5-26, p. 11-12.

Novorossiysk on Russia's Black Sea coast, and via Georgia. The former was the only one nearing completion for Baku oilfields in Azerbaijan, covering a distance of 1400 KM, one of the largest. It was completed in 1997. However, regional instability in Chechnya has been a major problem. The Chechen section of the pipeline was closed in 1999, and an alternative route completed in Mar 2000 via Dagestan, avoiding the Chechen Republic.

Kazakhstan created the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) as a joint venture between the Governments of Kazakhstan and Oman in 1992 for export of Kazakh oil from the Tenghiz oilfield via this route. Azerbaijan, Russia and some Western companies joined later on. The construction of this pipeline from Tenghiz to Novorossiysk, over a distance of 1580 KM (one half using existing pipeline), suffered many delays and was finally inaugurated in Mar 2001.

"The route via Georgia can be used for export of Azeri oil along the Baku-Supsa route, a distance of 830 KM, one of the shortest. It became operational in Apr 2000, but is still running at a reduced capacity. Another route through the Black Sea is Baku-Tbilisi-Batumi (Georgia), a distance of 900 KM. But the organised crime mafia that control the port have reduced this option to a lower priority."<sup>47</sup> The Russian government has initiated world's deepest under-water gas pipeline project, running from Russia to Turkey via the Black Sea. The project was completed with the exception of the complex under-water portion by 2001, while the balance is envisaged to be completed by 2004.

### *Mediterranean Routes*

The routes are - through Georgia onto Ceyhan (Turkey), or through Armenia to Ceyhan, or via Iran to Ceyhan. "The Department of State has been a staunch advocate of the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the trans-Caucasian gas pipeline from Turkmenistan, and pressed the leaders of Turkmenistan, Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan to sign a package of legal framework documents in Istanbul in 1999 under US auspices. The plan's strategic objective was two fold: to reduce Russia's political influence in the region by pushing it out of the Caspian Sea and further isolate Iran."<sup>48</sup> With a length of 1730 KM, it would be the longest of the routes, but would avoid problems associated with crossing either Armenia or Iran. A financial agreement was signed in Apr 2000, and engineering study commenced in 2001.

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<sup>47</sup> Akiner, Shirin, n. 42, p. 14.

<sup>48</sup> Rasizade, Alec, "The Mythology of Munificent Caspian Bonanza and Its Concomitant Pipeline Geopolitics", *Central Asian Survey*, (2002 21(1)), pp. 37-54, p. 37.

The second route is the easiest, but is fraught with political risks in Armenia and Eastern Turkey, due to the Azeri-Armenian conflict and Kurdish problem respectively. The route via Iran is technically and economically viable for export, but is unacceptable to Western investors while sanctions are in place. There are alternative routes circumventing the Bosphorus Straits: via the Russian pipeline to Novorossiysk - Trabzon /Samsun /Zanguldak-Mediterranean Sea. It would transport oil overland to the Black Sea port of Novorossiysk, thence by tankers or later by pipeline to any of the Turkish ports mentioned above, then overland to a terminal on the Mediterranean Sea. Main disadvantages are the high costs of construction and maintenance of two new terminals required in Turkey. The other alternative is from Novorossiysk to the Bulgarian Black Sea coast on to Greece. This route has found favour with the European Union. Other options are via Romania to Italy, and to Ukraine via Odessa to Brady.

### **The Afghanistan-Pakistan Route**

The US petroleum company Unocal and the Saudi company Delta Nimir signed a memorandum of understanding with the Turkmen government, regarding petroleum and gas pipeline projects from Turkmenistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan (Herat route) in 1997, after Taliban had captured Herat. The estimated length of the pipeline is 1043 KM. However, disturbed internal conditions and instability in Afghanistan, difficult terrain, distance and climatic conditions have made this route a difficult proposition at least for the foreseeable future. In spite of these conditions still prevailing, the companies have signed another agreement with Turkmen and Ahmad Karzai led government in Afghanistan in end 2002. The financial viability of this project is dependent upon an opening to the Indian market through a pipeline from Multan to India, which seems unlikely at least in the near future given the cooling of relations between India and Pakistan.

### **Regional Instability and Future Prospects**

The region is suffering from severe instability conditions in areas where the pipeline projects are to pass. The Chechen War may simmer for quite some time, though elections favouring staying within the Russian Federation have been completed. The neighbouring Dagestan and Kalmykiya states of the Russian Federation are more stable and have been taken up as alternative routes bypassing Groznyy. Georgia, another transit point also has a very fragile situation, and its war with the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia has been a matter of deep concern. The Central Asian governments are themselves very fragile, and not

based on popular support. Moreover, all of them face threat from Islamic fundamentalist organisations internally and externally. The deteriorating economic situation, rampant corruption and mass dissatisfaction - all point towards a serious social and political unrest. Russia has been trying to maintain good neighbourly relations with its Southern neighbours, leading to a gradual rapprochement. Iran has maintained cordial relations but is not especially close to any of its Central Asian neighbours. Finally, it may take years for normalcy to return to war torn ethnically fissiparous Afghanistan.

The excitement over Western involvement in the development of hydrocarbon resources of the region has given way to scepticism, resulting in a certain amount of disillusionment in the Central Asian countries, which are facing a potential social and political unrest. The problems of the legal status of the Caspian Sea and regional stability have increased the risks for foreign investors. Serious concerns have been expressed regarding rampant smuggling, large scale poaching and other illegal activities, and increasing environmental pollution in the Caspian Sea region. However, the situation has shown some improvement of late, with the petroleum industry and the local governments beginning to have a better understanding of each other's viewpoints, with the latter having learnt the Western ways of business. Most of the projects are still in the memorandum / feasibility stage, and are long term based, with very little short-term benefits.

Therefore, though excellent long-term benefits are forecast, the local population, which was expecting an oil boom on the lines of the Middle East, has been disillusioned. Most projects will start fructifying after 2010. The public opinion in Central Asia is "already in general either exhausted by economic hardships or increasingly discontented with political repression. That very situation presents a danger to the Americans whose rapprochement with Central Asian regimes may negatively affect their long term energy interests."<sup>49</sup>

"The Western world has a vested interest in the development of oilfields in the Central Asian and the Caspian region. This oil would provide the USA an opportunity to enhance its capabilities to manipulate the world oil industry to impose its hegemony. American interests in the region's oil would demand rapid and uninterrupted development of Caspian oil so as to reduce Western dependence on Persian Gulf oil and containment of Islamic Fundamentalism."<sup>50</sup>

The oil companies have staged a comeback in the world market since the mid-80s, indicating a shift in the power equations in the world oil market. These companies have been

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 52.



cooperating with their states in their effort to gain control over world oil. USA has always followed a policy of coordinating its policies with its oil companies, as part of its strategic planning to boost its foreign policy goals. The American 'Great Game' has been to propel the Caspian region to centre stage in the world oil market, resulting in its international integration. However, the Central Asian countries may need to keep in mind the experience of the oil-exporting countries of the Persian Gulf, in the context of outcome of the economic largesse being provided by the West to them. "Persian Gulf, Latin American and African oil based economies tend to promote political authoritarianism undermining the democratisation process, which in turn leads to unrest and social tension that in Islamic countries is reflected as Islamic protest. This precisely is the reason that 'political Islam' is posing the most potent threat to 'ruling Islam'."<sup>51</sup> Americans have always supported authoritarian 'ruling Islam', may it be Saudi Arabia or Pakistan. This brings to focus "compatibility of oil and democracy, which can be posed on two levels. The first has to do with ways in which the basics of political authoritarianism in the Middle East lies embedded in political and social structures associated with the 'monocrop' economies and rentier states. At the second level, democracy in the oil exporting countries is not compatible with the US policy of maintaining hegemony in the oil rich region."<sup>52</sup> One of the subsidiary aims of the war in Afghanistan was to remove the obstacles created by the Taliban regime and its Al Qaeda supporters to routing of oil pipeline from Central Asia through Afghanistan to the Indian Ocean shores of Pakistan. A similar story has been repeated in Iraq. It is easy to allow US entry in a state, but it is very difficult to make US quit. Moreover, USA provides security to a country based on its own national interests, and is known to have dumped alliance partners or gone against them when it suits USA that way.

American interest in the region is therefore, vital to the region's long-term stability. It mainly involves exploitation of enormous energy resources, and is routed through pipeline projects avoiding Russia and Iran. The interest of the governments in the region will be best served by a cautious approach in evolving their long-term policy, which involves all efforts to strike the best deals for oil and gas extraction and export, while at the same time over-indulgence might lead to severe instability in the region. One of the important planks of US policy in Central Asia is to contain Russian influence there one way or the other. However, the region's legacy, transport and communication infrastructure and gas and pipeline routes

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<sup>50</sup> Pant, Girijesh, "Global Oil Politics and the Caspian Basin", in Shams-ud-Din, ed., n. 24, pp. 357-366, p. 359.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 364.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 364.

remain heavily oriented to Russia.

### Security Perspective Of Central Asia

#### The Great Game

“It has been argued by the *Economist* that the US’s attitude towards the region is based primarily on strategic considerations, including Central Asian oil and gas, and that September 11, 2001, merely provides the opportunity to establish itself firmly in the Central Asian region.”<sup>53</sup> “The new Great Game is about creating niches of influence in Central Asia by neighbouring countries. It also relates to oil and gas, and who controls how much. It is also about new trade routes.”<sup>54</sup> According to a Western observer, “With billions of dollars and crucial strategic influence at stake, the struggle for control over the vast oil and gas reserves in the Caucasus and Central Asia is a tale of political intrigue, fierce commercial competition, geostrategic rivalries, ethnic feuding and elusive independence.”<sup>55</sup>

The ‘Great Game’ of Anglo-Russian competition for land and influence across the continent of Asia was played between the Tsarist southward expansion and the efforts of the British to keep Russia North of Afghanistan. The Russian conquest of the Caucasus in early 19<sup>th</sup> century brought the Russians closer to the Mediterranean Sea (and therefore Suez, the gateway to India), and to Iran, India’s neighbour. The Russo-Iranian Treaty of Turkamanchai (1828) was even more worrying for the British. That ‘Great Game’ ended with Russia and Britain agreeing to respect each other’s areas of influence and domination, keeping Afghanistan as buffer between them.

Today, Afghanistan has been the initiator of the ‘New Great Game’. A similar ‘Great Game’ is being enacted for laying oil and gas pipelines to utilise the untapped petroleum and other resources of Central Asia. The region for this ‘Great Game’ needs to be expanded to include in its fold the littoral states of the Caspian Sea, that were a part of the erstwhile Soviet Union, in addition to Central Asia. US interest in the region has increased tremendously after major oil and gas findings have been reported there. US is also keen to evolve a ‘New Silk Route’, which foresees a corridor of prosperous, stable and secular states more or less allied

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<sup>53</sup> Chandra, Satish, “Central Asia – The Great Game”, *Journal of Indian Ocean Studies*, Vol. 10, No 1, Apr 2002, pp. 54-64, p., 57.

<sup>54</sup> Shams-ud-Din, n. 18, p. 340.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p. 340.

to the West. The Silk Road Strategy Act adopted by US Congress in 1998, sought to establish multiple pipelines to bring Central Asian and Caspian oil and gas to the international market. "The crux of the entire geo-political rivalry in the region is the uninterrupted flow of oil and gas from the region to the Western energy markets, restricting Russian and Iranian control on oil and gas exploration, development and marketing. The winners in the struggle for pipeline routes are likely to secure major strategic advantages, while the losers would be marginalized in the coming years."<sup>56</sup>

"Western authors point out that the next millennium will see the establishment of states with societies and economies that will transcend international boundaries. It will be a millennium of the multi-national companies, who will dominate the economic landscape, and international norms of business and related laws will spread around the world. It will see an adherence to universal standards and morality, with the local governments pursuing the good features of local cultures and mutual tolerance."<sup>57</sup> Thus, while the Western world wants to establish a new international world order governed by Western values and laws, the maintenance of peace and tranquillity in the local society has been left to the local governments concerned. The achievement of the former would automatically lead to a clash with the oriental civilisations, leading to unrest and instability. The latter aspect has been neglected by the Western world, leaving the local satraps to run their fiefdom in the manner that they wish. However, this is a serious cause for worry. As has happened elsewhere in the Middle East and other regions, the local governments, especially under such circumstances, have not come up to the standards of governance expected in modern nation-states. This could create a vacuum to be filled by extremist elements, waiting in the wings to take over.

Islamic fundamentalist forces are the other major players in the New Great Game in Central Asia. Though they have become latent because of post-September 11, 2001 actions by the US, status quo is not likely to remain for long. They are using this time for expanding their cadre base, rearming and preparing for the next round. "In the future, wars between nations will be ended, but internal barbarians will cause civil strife and chaos anywhere in the world. The greatest danger is the rise of fanatics, and self-centred radicals, who will seek to overthrow the common good for their own advantage."<sup>58</sup> It is these elements who are likely to cause major upheavals in the world.

Russia, under Putin is trying to regain its lost position of pre-eminence in the region.

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<sup>56</sup> Alam, Shah, n. 46, p. 5.

<sup>57</sup> Frye, Richard, "Central Asia as a Cultural Centre", in Shams-ud-Din, ed., n. 24, p. 198.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 198.

It has been making efforts to increase its presence in Central Asia, and has elaborate security arrangements with the states of the region. China factor is the last of the important pieces of the New Great Game. China has been following an economy driven foreign policy mainly based on its long-term economic interests. Any Chinese forays into the region can not be taken lightly, in view of massive developments in its economy and infrastructure, especially along its coast, and its decision to carry out massive infrastructural construction activities in its as yet under developed Northern and North Western regions, bordering Central Asia. These activities would need large amount of oil and gas, which are readily available in Central Asia and can be easily obtained from there. Moreover, once Xinjiang is subsumed into China, a demographical and economic expansion westward and northward is expected.

Primakov proposed Russia-China-India strategic triangle in 1998, which was initially considered of theoretical value. It started being discussed in various corridors of power later, pre September 11, 2001. However, September 11, 2001 changed all that, at least for the time being. USA has entrenched itself strongly in the region, and is cooperating with Russia, India and China in its fight against terrorism. All of them are keen to improve relations with USA individually, while trying to improve relations with each other at the same time. Islamic extremism threatens all of them – Russia, China, USA and India – and has become a common enemy to be first contended with. However, this situation is unlikely to last long. The latent US-China competitiveness is likely to emerge eventually, causing tensions in the Central Asian region.

Thus, the 'New Great Game' is not only concerned with gas and oil pipelines and natural resources, but also with the creation of corridors for trade and transportation across the Eurasian landmass, connecting the East with the West, and domination of the Eurasian landmass that is central to all the major powers. The trade and commerce highways would permit unhindered movement of goods. There are three major routes of trade under consideration by the West. One, the Northern - Siberian Route; two, the Central – the Silk Route from Japan/Korea to China to Central Asia on to Europe; and, three, the Southern Route, from Malaysia to Singapore to Bangladesh and India on to Central Asia and then Europe. Central Asia is at the centre of all these, becoming the hub of activities of major powers.

The squeeze is being clearly felt in the region, with USA, Russia, China and the Islamic fundamentalists attempting to enhance their influence, though the 'Great Power' presence in the region is also resulting in arrest of Islamic fundamentalism. "The US embrace of Central Asian regimes is likely to entail American responsibility for regional security and

stability, including the support of the authoritative, even dictatorial regimes and the suppression of radical Islam. Choosing the lesser of the evils – radical Islam and corrupt dictatorship – will mean support for the latter just as the USA has done in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. This will be complicated by the region's traditional ethnic rivalries, fuelled by a growing competition for land and water."<sup>59</sup> This itself is a sure recipe for troubled times ahead for Central Asia.

### **Geopolitical Significance**

“The emergence of several independent states in the Southern tier has dramatically altered the regional balance of power, and created far-reaching consequences for European, Middle Eastern, Central and South Asian politics, economics and security.”<sup>60</sup> A number of forces that determine the geopolitical balance of the region are active in Central Asia. These include Islam, ethnicity, financial prowess of the Western world, Russia and the CIS group of countries, Middle East, China, Iran, and the Turkic identity.

Islam is the most important factor in the region. The degree of involvement in Islam at the civilisational level is high in the traditional centres of Islamic influence in the Fergana Valley, and low in the steppe of Kazakhstan, mountainous Kyrgyzstan and the large desert tracts of Turkmenistan. Though all the states have adopted secular constitutions, they are targets of Islamic expansionism both from inside and outside their states.

The next important factor in the region is ethnicity. The internal and external borders of the Central Asian states are not totally inclusive of their ethnic populations. Ethnic populations transcend intra-region national borders, as well as external borders with Afghanistan, China and Iran. “Therefore, the Central Asian states cannot separate themselves from each other with a Great Wall of China because of the mismatch between the borders of settlement of ethnic groups and the state boundaries.”<sup>61</sup> Though this phenomena is prevalent the world over, but in Central Asia, the ethnic self identification is much stronger than their country specific self-identification, which gives rise to ethnic conflicts and tensions within and between states.

The US and the Western world, with their strong purse strings – financial and investment backing, and technological expertise, which force the Central Asian states to

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<sup>59</sup> Rumer, Boris, “The Power Balance in Central Asia”, *Survival*, Vol. 44, No. 3, Autumn 2002, pp. 57-68, p.66.

<sup>60</sup> Jones, Scott A., n. 1, p. 1.

<sup>61</sup> Naumkin, Vitaly V., “The Emerging Geopolitical Balance in Central Asia: A Russian View”, in Chufin, ed., n. 17, pp. 83-99, p. 84-85.

develop close relations with them and the CIS group of countries, which have maintained close relations with each other despite hiccups, are also important players in the geostrategic and geopolitical planes in the region. Turkmenistan has remained neutral, Uzbekistan is somewhat allergic to CIS, attempting to ally with USA, while Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan and Tajikistan have made efforts to integrate closely with the CIS.

Middle East is another factor, especially the export of conservative brand of Islam from Saudi Arabia, which has taken keen interest in spreading Wahhabi Islamic influence in the region by a liberal use of money and resources. Afghanistan is a major factor for the region, due to its never-ending civil war, common ethnicity with Central Asia in the North and Pakistan in the South, and its role in spread of Islamic extremism. Pakistan also remains a factor so far as export of indoctrinated and trained jihadis in hoards to any part of the world. Pakistan, being the centre of gravity of international Islamic terrorism in conjunction with Southern Afghanistan, is bound to affect the region by igniting flames of religious fanaticism.

Though China is presently viewed as a sea oriented state, with its major infrastructural and industrial developments along the seacoast; however, a significant spurt in China's oil and energy consumption is likely to take place in the coming decade, mainly in the presently backward North and North West China. It would perforce have to rely heavily on Russian and Central Asian supplies. Moreover, a severe population explosion is likely to force a movement towards the Eurasian landmass. "Illegal Chinese immigration in large numbers to Russia and Kazakhstan are already causing problems there. Kazakhstan, taking account of both the tragic experience of the distant past and present realities, at times feels a deep-seated mistrust of China's intentions. To counter such external threats, the Central Asian states cannot do without the assistance of third parties."<sup>62</sup>

Geographically, influence of its neighbours on the region is directly related to their ability to provide it with access to the sea. Though the West advocates Turkey as a model of modern and liberal Muslim state, it has not been able to make deep inroads in the region due to its inability to provide financial support and access to the sea. In comparison, while Iran provides Turkmenistan access to the port of Bandar Abbas, the nearest port to the region is Karachi, at a distance of 2720 KM from Dushanbe.

There are fascinating dimensions to the demographic question of the region, which makes it imperative that we look at this question separately. First is the uneven growth of the Slav and the Central Asian Muslim populations. A study covering the period from 1959-

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p. 90-91.

1979 explains this well; while it is 20 percent for the Slav people over a 20-year period, it is about 100 percent for the second category. The Muslim population in Central Asia at the present rate of growth of about 3 percent per annum is likely to exceed 100 million by 2025. The decline in Russian population is marked on two counts: a low birth rate, and emigration. The Russian exodus adversely affects industry and economy as they still form bulk of the experienced managerial and bureaucratic work force. There is a preponderance of Uzbeks in the population of Central Asia, numbering over 16 million, about 33 percent of the overall population, giving rise to Uzbek ambitions of regional power status. They are present in all the republics, especially dominating the Fergana Valley. In addition, the Uzbek population in Afghanistan numbers more than four million, in addition. An ever-increasing Chinese business and trade community is another factor that needs to be vectored in. Central Asia has porous borders, is surrounded by powers that would like to create a niche place for themselves in the region, which are a cause of concern for security and stability of the region, and makes cross border illegal movement easy.

The region has an abundance of natural resources, especially oil and gas, the competition for which is going to intensify in the years to come. In addition to the large oil and gas reserves in the region, Kazakhstan possesses a quarter of the world's known uranium reserves, whereas Uzbekistan holds the largest gold mine on earth with an annual capacity of 50 tons. Uzbekistan is also the world's fourth largest cotton producer. Tajikistan, apart from holding the world's largest known deposits of silver, possesses enormous gold and aluminium deposits, whereas Turkmenistan is the world's fourth largest producer of natural gas. While the newly created states of Central Asia are trying to achieve economic prosperity and social and political stability, the industrialised world is trying to increase its influence in the region. "For long-term stability, it is essential that the two are complementary; foreign assistance and investment should lead to stability and development, finally resulting in democratisation. New states attempting simultaneously to solidify independence and institute radical reforms while in a deep economic crisis are bound to be sensitive to numerous risks and are conscious of their vulnerability."<sup>63</sup> The region suffers from a number of internal and external threats, as a result of its geopolitical importance, great power rivalry and intra region instabilities.

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<sup>63</sup> Moldaliev, Orozbek, "Security Challenges for Kyrgystan", in Bertsch, et. al. ed., n. 1, pp. 256-270, p. 258.

### External Threats

The external threats to the countries of the region can emanate from its neighbours, namely Russia, Iran, China and Afghanistan in the conventional sense. In this regard, internal instability and the high conflict potential of the region are major factors to be considered, especially in view of the disturbed conditions in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Russia is a major and pre-eminent power in the region, with the Russian Diaspora spread over all the Central Asian states.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgystan have long common borders with China, which are yet to be demarcated at places, especially along the Kazakh border. Kazakhstan fears a Chinese threat more seriously than the Russian one. An agreement for reduction of forces along the border has been signed between China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan, Tajikistan and Russia, thus ensuring a legal guarantee of territorial integrity along the current borders with China. However, China is not considered a serious security threat in the near future, involved as it is in its own economic development.

Most Central Asian leaders feel that "too close an association with Russia may weaken their own state's movement towards independence and will be viewed by domestic opposition leaders as a sign of continued subservience."<sup>64</sup> However, they would need to pursue dual strategy, so long as they cannot afford independent military forces, or take the help of US presence/ cooperation to counter the Russians. "All the Central Asian states have signed bilateral military cooperation and security pacts with Russia; however, their implementation has left much to be desired. They have shown a certain amount of ambivalence towards Moscow in this regard."<sup>65</sup> The main threat perceived by the Central Asian states from Russia concerns the 25 million strong Russian Diaspora in these states. Kazakhstan fears Russian interference in favour of the Russian majority Northern Kazakhstan. With Russia also having major minority groups, its interest would be in non-interference in other states' internal affairs. Moreover, Moscow has promised to uphold the sanctity of its existing borders with all the CIS states; and none of the Central Asian states faces any security threat from Russia in the near future.

Iran poses no open or covert threat to Central Asian states, as it is currently involved in its own economic reconstruction. Moreover, it is financially not in a position to harbour any ill intentions towards the region. American sanctions and it being clubbed in the category of 'rouge states' by USA are other major factors guiding a pragmatic and sane approach in its

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<sup>64</sup> Dawisha, Karen et. al., n. 12, p. 253.



relations with the Central Asian states.

External threats also include regional instability, high conflict potential of Central Asia and its surrounding areas, drugs trafficking, refugees, migrants etc. A more serious threat from across the borders is from within the Central Asian states, with ethnic communities transgressing borders. This issue was officially resolved with the signing of the Alma Ata Declaration by all the Central Asian states, declaring that, 'former administrative borders within the Soviet Union are inviolable and are not subject to change.' Despite the agreement, questions are being raised regarding the ownership of formerly communal pastures. The demarcation of their borders is difficult, as the same ethnic community lives on both sides in such disputed areas; for example, Tajiks live in some such localities along the Tajik-Kyrgys border. In some areas, this issue is further aggravated by high density of population along the border, like in Fergana Valley. Another difficulty is the "perception in much of the population in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan that their people lost significant territories during the Soviet era, despite the fact that before the 1917 revolution, no nation states existed within their current borders."<sup>66</sup> The arbitrarily drawn up borders between the five states further complicate the situation. The borders bear little relation to the ethnic realities of the region and large groups of one nationality find themselves in another country. This has resulted in Uzbekistan periodically claiming parts of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Similar contradictions prevail along the borders between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Everyone is wary of the Uzbekistan, which aspires to be the regional power in Central Asia. While Tajikistan has a large Uzbek minority, Uzbekistan also considers a strong and independent Tajikistan a potential threat as it could serve as a supportive centre for its Tajik minority. In return, Tajikistan also feels threatened by Uzbekistan and considers Russia as an ally against Uzbek expansionism.

Uzbek nationalism has been assertive in the region, being the most populous state in the region, with its location being central to the stability of Central Asia. In addition to rivalry between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan for regional supremacy, the under current of inter-ethnic tensions will be a major factor in the success of any regional formulation. Tajik-Uzbek tensions are at the top in this regard. A case in point is the differing perceptions of origin of these two tribal entities. "While Tajik elites have argued that the Uzbeks are Turkicised Iranians, some Uzbek elites, on their part, have maintained that the Tajiks are simply Turks

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p. 254.

<sup>66</sup> Moldaliev, Orozbek, n. 63, p.262.

who have forgotten their original language.”<sup>67</sup> Such biases once strongly embedded in a society take more than a generation and a high level of social, political and economic development in both the states to be obliterated.

The threat of Islamic fundamentalism has taken serious dimensions in the last few years, with Afghanistan and Pakistan along the Southern periphery of Central Asia as the centre of gravity of international Islamic terrorism and fundamentalism. The external threat from Afghanistan is to be seen in this context.

Unresolved disputes over territory and control of sea-based resources also constitute longer-term security concerns, for which all the regional states need to be prepared. The border security and confidence building agreements signed between China, Russia and the Central Asian republics, including limitations on military deployment, establishment of demilitarised zones and advance notification of military exercises, constitute tangible accomplishments and they attest to important political and security changes.

### **Internal Threats**

The most pressing internal threat in all the Central Asian states is the economic crisis, because of economic transformation. In fact, these states are in the throes of economic, social and political transformation. The situation is further accentuated by multi-ethnicity in the region and within each state coupled with a paucity of resources, resulting in biased allotment of resources favouring the titular community or the ruling combination of tribes/clans, causing disillusionment, leading to repression by the regime. This has resulted in the eruption of a number of internal conflicts in the region.

Even after 12 years of economic reforms, there are very few signs of success, as economic growth rates are low and insignificant. Kazakhstan has been able to attract more foreign investment, and has shown better progress. Kyrgystan has had very little foreign investment, and the middle class entrepreneurship suffering from heavy taxation, bureaucracy and organised crime is just emerging. Uzbekistan has carried out very little reforms, and is maintaining balance of trade only through export of gold and cotton; Tajikistan has had very little or no economic reforms because of civil war, and Turkmenistan's economy is mainly based on export of gas. Their economies are lacking infrastructure and very little attention is being paid to this aspect in these states.

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<sup>67</sup> Smith, Graham, et. al., n. 36, p. 213.

Most of the ruling elite in the states are former ex-communists who have turned nationalists. The regimes are autocratic and dictatorial, with a sham democracy. Regionalism, patron-client relationship, tribal and clan favouritism, and improper centre-periphery relations also have huge potential for causing internal instability. The ruling elite in all the states openly favour their own region/clan/tribe, ensuring that fruits of development are able to reach only the favoured. Such blatant misuse of government funds and finances openly breeds discontent in the neglected. Recruitment to the Armed Forces, the police and the government are also based on personal loyalties. The patron-client relationship that was followed during the Communist rule continues to be practised. The negative fallouts of such policy are a serious internal threat in all the Central Asian states. These threats are considered in succeeding paragraphs.

### *Islamic Extremism*

The malaise of lowering living standards, rampant corruption, lack of democratic rights, violation of basic human rights, favouritism, nepotism, blatant arrogance and misuse of authority cause discontent and may be the harbinger of 'political Islam'. 'Political Islam', offering justice and equality is an attractive proposition, compared with the injustice being meted out at present. Islamic fundamentalism has already taken deep roots in parts of Tajikistan, and is active in the populated areas of Uzbekistan and Kyrgystan. This issue is discussed separately.

### *Ethnic Tensions and Uzbek Hegemonistic Tendencies*

The process of glasnost and perestroika brought about inter-ethnic clashes in the open, during the Gorbachev period in all the five states. Bloody clashes were experienced between different ethnic groups, leading to mass exodus of the Russians from the region, who have been feeling insecure since the break up of the Soviet Union. Moreover, the historic inter-ethnic tensions that were kept under control during the Communist regime have now come to the fore.

Uzbekistan lies at the geographic centre of the region, borders all the other five states and it alone out of the five states has no common border with any external major power. Within Central Asia, Uzbekistan is distrusted by all the other states for several reasons. Most important reason has been the Uzbek desire to be a pre-eminent power in Central Asia. "It is vying with Kazakhstan for that status, and had engaged in self-aggrandisement at the expense of other Central Asian states. In 1990, the Uzbek press ran a provocative article suggesting

that Uzbekistan be renamed as Turkistan or Turan, thereby implying that all the territory encompassed by the old Tsarist state save Kazakhstan belonged within Uzbekistan's domain."<sup>68</sup> Uzbek nationalists have been openly advocating the creation of Greater Turkistan. This hegemonistic ambition is further accentuated by the overwhelmingly large Uzbek population in other states, which is a source of worry for these states, as Uzbekistan is known to support the cause of these minorities actively, especially in Kyrgystan and Tajikistan. Therefore, any call for a Greater Turkistan, which in all probability will be an Uzbek dominated affair, is seen as a veiled attempt on the part of Uzbekistan to gain a hegemonistic position in the region. For Kyrgystan, Uzbekistan is more insidious than Russification.

A major fault line in the region is the one that separate Turkish Uzbeks and Persian Tajiks. They have had long standing tensions in the Fergana Valley and elsewhere as they refuse to recognise each others' distinct history; "the Tajiks consider the Uzbeks to be Turkisised Iranians, while the Uzbek chauvinists claim that the Tajiks came to Central Asia after the Arab conquest, and therefore are not Central Asians, or are Turks who were gradually Iranianised."<sup>69</sup> "Tajik elites have argued that the Uzbeks are Turkisised Iranians, while some Uzbek elites, on their part, have maintained that the Tajiks are simply Turks who have forgotten their original language."<sup>70</sup> In Tajikistan, primarily, it was neither religious nor ethnic tensions that were responsible for spilling over into open conflict; but regional and clan rivalries exacerbated by the near total absence of effective control at the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border, which allowed weapons and Tajiks hardened by years of civil war from across the border to flood into the Southern provinces and the capital of Dushanbe.

"The Tajik fighters' hatred of Russians made the remaining Russian garrison a particular target."<sup>71</sup> Russian participation in peacekeeping operations led to an increasing vulnerability of Russian civilians and troops alike. The attacks on Russian troops and civilians, leading to mass exodus of Russians demonstrated Russian weakness in the region. The Tajik conflict has also demonstrated to the Central Asian leaders the need to coordinate their regional security policies, with Kazakhstan mooted a Central Asian security system.

The intermingling of their populations transcending national boundaries is another cause for concern. More than 20 percent of all Tajiks live in Uzbekistan, while 7 percent of all Uzbeks live in Tajikistan. Uzbekistan's attitude towards Uzbeks living outside Uzbekistan has further sharpened the apprehensions of the other states. President Karimov "has

<sup>68</sup> Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, n. 12, p. 85.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>70</sup> Smith, Graham, et. al., n. 36, p., 213.

articulated a foreign policy that is similar to that of Russia – the right of Uzbekistan to intervene in the name of protecting Uzbeks, independent of where they might live.”<sup>72</sup> In a speech in Jan 1995, Tajikistan’s Minister for Interior, Yakubjan Salimov, openly demanded the political unification of ethnic Tajiks, whether living currently in Tajikistan or Uzbekistan or Afghanistan – “ I call on all those ethnic Tajiks , citizens of Tajikistan who have a drop of young blood and manliness, a little Tajik shame and honour: let us brothers unite together! Let us try to regain the land of the Tajiks, the land of the Samanids, in order to be able to hold our heads high and say we are Tajiks.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, Uzbek assertiveness has been one of the main factors in militating against regional cooperation.

On the home front, the Uzbek leadership fears even street demonstrations, and any conglomeration of its citizenry, howsoever trivial and insignificant as dangerous for its survival. It has genuine fears of Islamic extremism, and leaves no effort to fight it. As the civil war broke out in Tajikistan, Karimov first tried to seal Uzbek border with Tajikistan, branding the Tajik opposition forces as Islamic forces. The coalition government installed in Tajikistan in 1997 was also considered a threat by the conservative ruling elite in Uzbekistan, as the Islamic forces were part of the government and that such coalitions could be formed to run the state.

### Drug Trafficking

Drug trafficking is currently posing a serious threat to the social fabric of the region. The Central Asian states are deeply embroiled in illicit production of drugs and drug trafficking as a route to Europe and Russia. The state machinery in most cases is incapable of tackling the menace, mainly due to either massive corruption at all levels or the state itself suffering from internal instability. In addition to trafficking in drugs, the money so earned is being increasingly “used to pursue political aims: the money received is used to finance illegal political and military activities, to purchase arms, fund armed groups, or support extremist groups working for the destabilisation of society.”<sup>74</sup> Drug trafficking has always provided the terrorists a substantial portion of their funds. It has led to arms smuggling, and has been a key source of funding opposition groups in Central Asia.

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<sup>71</sup> Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, n. 12, p. 221.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, p. 86.

<sup>73</sup> Hyman, Anthony, “Russia, Central Asia and the Taliban” in Maley, William, ed., *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban*, London: Hurst and Co., 1998, pp 104- 116, p. 106.

<sup>74</sup> Naumkin, Vitaly V., n. 61, p. 92.

There are vast areas in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan that are under poppy cultivation. A number of factories involved in refining opium are reported in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Afghanistan accounts for approximately 70 percent of the world's poppy cultivation. The problem has been further accentuated by lack of Afghan government control over large areas and corruption at all levels.

### *Fragmentation of Society*

Though the security situation in the region is apparently stable, there still exist a number of factors that could precipitate social unrest under conditions of economic hardships. The society in all the states is fragmented along ethnic, religious, tribal, clan and regional lines. While these rifts existed during the Soviet regime, there was a perception that there was social equality and solidarity. These cleavages of various kinds have now started to surface, though they are still not posing a serious threat to the states. The most dangerous divide that has emerged is between the 'haves' and have-nots', with the ruling elite suspected of accumulating wealth by illegal means. "The new oil rich oligarchy drives Mercedes and BMWs in the tree lined streets of Almaty, while the rest of the population struggles to afford a bus ticket. Little of Kazakhstan's new wealth has trickled down to the mass of ordinary people. This economic disparity, along with lack of democratic representation and the repression of religious expression are now fuelling political unrest and driving more and more people to radical Islamic movements."<sup>75</sup>

Increasing social stratification is a very severe problem, with the rich getting richer and the poor poorer. The new rich class live in great opulence, while the vast majority is witnessing a drastic decline in their standard of living. The high birth rate in the rural areas, high level of unemployment, and exorbitantly costly social service - health care and education systems which used to be free during the Soviet regime - resulting in a sharp decline in education and health standards, have created an underclass. This increasing stratification may lead to mass discontent, ultimately resulting in social upheaval and a severe class war.

### *Corruption*

Corruption is a dangerous social phenomena and a serious destabilising factor in Central Asia. It creates a sense of distrust among the population towards the authorities and

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<sup>75</sup> Ahmed Rashid, n. 13, p. 66.

lowers national morale. "Corruption – bribery, fraud, misappropriation of public property, covert levies, nepotism, cronyism, and other such forms of malpractices – is endemic to the region."<sup>76</sup> There has been a severe decline in ethics in public life. Corruption is all pervasive in the system as those who are employed milk the system to the maximum extent possible, because their job continuity is not guaranteed. This has led to subversion of education and economic reforms, and privileges to a favoured few. It is generally acknowledged that the current level of corruption is a serious obstacle to efficient functioning of the state.

### *Organised Crime*

As a result of social and class distortions that have occurred over the last 12 years, organised crime has taken deep roots in the region. There are crime syndicates that indulge in coercion, mostly on behalf of the ruling elite, arms and drugs smuggling and provide support to the political leadership for them to retain their hold over the society.

### *Environmental Degradation*

Soviet era economic planning and implementation of faulty agricultural policies have led to a severe environmental crisis in the region. Potentially the most serious problems are the drying up of the Aral Sea, the increasing scarcity of water and the shortage of arable land. Land devoted to cotton production constitutes about 80% of all arable land. To supply the cotton crop increasing amounts of water are siphoned off from the regions' two main rivers, the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya. This has reduced their inflow into the Aral Sea, which has as a result lost over a third of its area. Sand and salt from the dry seabed are transported by winds to the outlying area causing serious health problems and the desertification of once fertile land. Seepage of water from inefficient irrigation canals and the lack of crop rotation have led a decline in productivity and salinity of the land. Heavy use of chemicals and pesticides in an effort to increase production has contaminated most of the drinking water supplies in the region. Any long-term solution of the Aral Sea problem requires co-operation of all the states. Both Amu Darya and Syr Darya take off from Tajikistan and Kyrgystan, who are the poorest states of the region and urgently need additional funds. They have threatened that they will charge the downstream states for water, if their own economic interests are not looked into. This specifically was in the context of Uzbekistan switching off gas supplies to

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<sup>76</sup> Akiner, Shirin, "Emerging Political Order in the New Caspian States", in Berstch, et. al., ed., n. 1, pp. 90-128, p. 91.

neighbouring states at will. At the same time, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan suffer from an acute shortage of water, for irrigation purposes. The states may need to change the pattern of crops, modernise their methods of irrigation and de-pollute the Aral Sea for revitalising the Sea, while Kyrgystan and Tajikistan may need additional funds for power generation from an abundance of water in their mountainous regions.

### Summary of Threat Perception

The security threats being faced by each of the Central Asian states are of somewhat similar nature, keeping in tune with the peculiarities of each state. At the present juncture, Central Asian states do not face any direct and serious military threat. They have no territorial disputes with their neighbours, and are making no claims on each other. A direct military aggression from outside is therefore remote, though intra region external threat is a possibility, especially from a resurgent and arrogant Uzbekistan, vying for a regional power status. Intra-state conflicts are possible in states where the titular ethnic group is just about 50 percent of the population, like Tajikistan and Kyrgystan, as fallout of strong repressive measures being adopted by the regimes, especially in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. A process of displacement of minority groups, or ideological/religious conflicts, or a conflict of power interests can also take place, which may finally result in civil war.

The "likely trends of conflict that are possible are as follows:-

- Resistance against any attempt to make CIS a functional mechanism.
- Conflict between Asian successor states and Russia.
- Conflicts within Central Asia, like ethnic, tribal, national, cultural and religious conflicts.
- Inter-state conflicts within the region."<sup>77</sup>

The first two levels seem unlikely, and at the present juncture hypothetical. Inter-state conflicts can occur because of ethnic cleansing by one state, and artificial boundaries that have been drawn up. They seem to be suffering from more of economic and internal threats, and less of military threat due to social and economic upheaval caused by independence. The Uzbek-Tajik boundary dispute and intense rivalry almost amounting to animosity would have resulted in a conflict, had it not been for the threat of Islamic fundamentalist forces, which have forced Uzbekistan to support the current regime in power in Tajikistan. In addition, the latter has been forced to seek Russian military assistance to counter this Uzbek threat.



Therefore, the Armed Forces of the states of the region would be mainly involved in maintaining internal security and keeping the regimes in place.

### **Armed Forces**

The Central Asian states were heavily dependent upon the Soviet 'centre' for subsidies during the Soviet period. After its break up, they wanted unified Armed Forces under Russia, to be controlled and financed by Russia. This was not acceptable to Russia. However, it got involved in a strategic partnership with all the Central Asian states in 1992, as a result of its own strategic considerations.

There was a collusion of interests between the Russian Federation and the ruling elite in Central Asia, who are all ex-Communist nomenclatura, and looked to Russia for help and succour. It is this elite factor that has been a key to close relationship between Russia and the states of the region. Gradually, natural differences between the Central Asian states themselves because of their charting their own independent course in formulating domestic and foreign policy have resulted in a somewhat disunited region.

Initially, all the Central Asian states except Kyrgystan announced that they would create their own defence forces. However, other pressing matters pushed these plans into the background, with the states working out their security requirements either within the CIS framework or bilaterally with Russia. Agreement was signed in Jan 1993 for a peacekeeping force for Tajikistan consisting of Russian, Kazakh, Kyrgys and Uzbek forces. Nearly 20,000 Russian and some troops from Kyrgystan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan were stationed in Southern Tajikistan to fight against the opposition forces. In 1999 and 2000, the Central Asian component was withdrawn leaving only the troops from Russia. Thus, despite their resentment at having the Russians in their countries, they understand that Russia is their best ally to provide them both internal and external security and is likely to remain so in near future.

The deterioration of economic performance and the lop-sided distribution of military-industrial complexes have created major obstacles in the path of long term military strategy, as the plans of the new states are constrained by a scarcity of resources. In the formative years, whereas Kazakhstan had established military forces composed of several military branches, the other Central Asian states established limited military contingents rather than complete forces. The main reasons for these states not going in for full-fledged Armed Forces

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<sup>77</sup>Weideman, Prof Dr. Diethelm, "The changing International Order and the Central Asian Conflict –

were their participation in the larger security framework of the CIS, their economic state and the complete absence of an indigenous officer corps. However, as a result of the threat posed by various extremist Islamic groups, they have made efforts at increasing their military capacity. Larger neighbours surround the smaller and weaker states like Kyrgystan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, and even if they create large Armed Forces, their capability against these neighbours would remain dubious. Therefore, it may be best in their interest to have small formations capable of stopping incursions by armed bandit groups or militia and fighting internal disorder, while having security treaties with Russia to maintain their territorial integrity against incursions by menacing neighbours.

The demise of the Soviet Union left a large military machine intact, deployed mainly along the periphery of the Soviet borders. The Armed Forces came under the control of the states where they were located at the time of the break up of USSR. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were the main beneficiaries of this arrangement. They took command of all troops on their territory at the time of the break up of USSR, bringing them under their jurisdiction, and declaring the creation of their Armed Forces. The status of the troops located in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgystan was not settled so easily: Turkmenistan did not want so many forces, Tajikistan had very little control over its area, and Kyrgystan was reluctant to set up its own Armed Forces. As most of the Army was manned and officered by Russians, most of them were to be withdrawn to Russia, which lacked housing facilities for such large forces. The presence of these Russian troops on foreign soil also undermined the authority of the political leaders of the new states. With Russian officers having spent their entire life outside Russia and poor housing facilities back home, they were reluctant to leave. Therefore, some actively supported the Russian Diaspora cause, some advanced renewed Russian hegemonistic drive, some others reportedly sold off their equipment to black marketers, while still some others took oath of allegiance to these new states. Local elites responded to the presence of former Soviet forces through a rapid emergence of local military establishments, vying for scarce resources, and looking for security guarantors from outside the region. Thus, the Soviet legacy itself was undermining the viability and authority of the new states. For the new states facing enormous economic hardships and challenges, and burdened with high levels of insecurity and intra-state conflicts, military power assumed special importance as an instrument of state building, fighting separatism and as an arbiter

between various groups within the state. Thus, the military has the capacity to exert major influence on the internal evolution of these states.

However, the Armed Forces of all the Central Asian states are relatively small and at an early stage of development. These were formed on the basis of Soviet personnel and equipment stationed on their respective territories at the time of break up of the Soviet Union. None of the countries has nuclear weapons, Kazakhstan having renounced them in 1995. They are all in need of modernisation, reorganisation, reequipping and retraining. Some training facilities do exist in these countries; and several bilateral agreements have been signed with Turkey and some European countries for training abroad. Russian officers have been mostly retained on contract basis in these countries, as their own titular officers are very few. The strongest forces in the region are of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. As such, the Central Asian states are dependent upon Russia to provide them military aid and assistance whenever there is a need. There are numerous allegations of internal rivalry and corruption in the Armed Forces. Their morale is low and their leadership is mostly of poor quality.

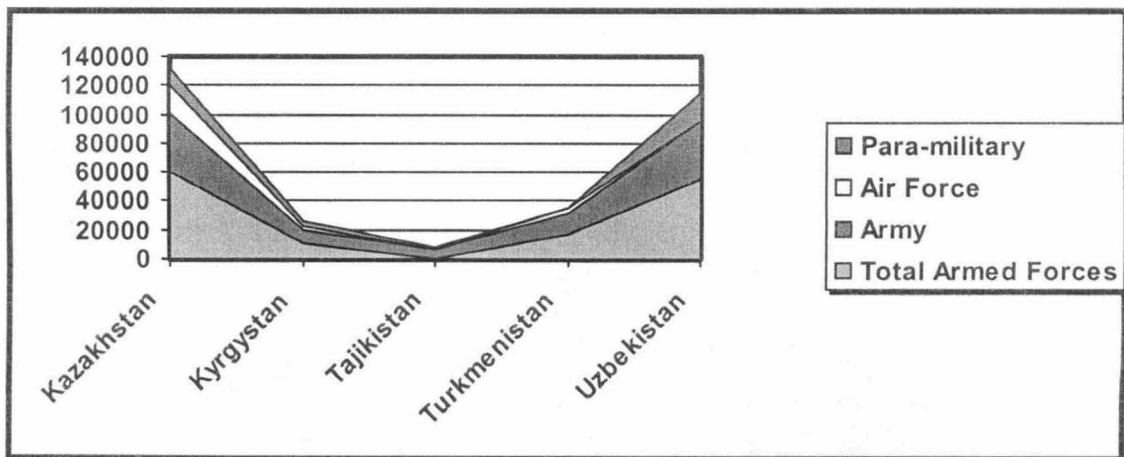
With fragile regimes and an inexperienced military leadership, the task of creating a new military doctrine is a challenging one for all these states. The lack of an established military doctrine, absence of an established military-industrial base and weaponry and an insufficiently trained officer corps forced all these states to join the CIS. The military balance of the region is given at Table 4.

**Kyrgystan** had initially declared that it would not have any defence forces of its own. Russian border troops assumed responsibility of guarding Kyrgys frontiers in Oct 1992. The only apparent threat to Kyrgystan is from Islamic extremists, or an inter-region conflict within the state, or an Uzbek uprising assisted by Uzbekistan's designs for a Greater Turan. It is considered as a weak state, with no oil and gas resources, and is dependent on Moscow economically and militarily.

**Uzbekistan** set up a National Guard in Jan 1992, formed from its own Ministry of Interior troops. The Uzbek parliament specified in 1992 that the Uzbek Armed Forces would consist of land and air units, Air Defence units, National Guard and a special task force. Uzbekistan also increased its cooperation with Russia in the military field, proclaiming Russia as the guarantor of peace in Central Asia. In view of the threat posed to the regime from forces in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan's forces got involved in fighting the anti-government forces in Tajikistan in 1992, with Uzbek forces carrying out air strikes against Tajik opposition forces a number of times. With the strongest military forces in the region, Uzbekistan has been flexing its muscles, especially against the two weaker neighbours –

**TABLE 4**  
**ARMED FORCES OF CENTRAL ASIAN STATES AND RUSSIA**

| ITEM                | RUS        | KAZ    | KYR    | TAJIK   | TURK              | UZBEK             |
|---------------------|------------|--------|--------|---------|-------------------|-------------------|
| TOTAL               | 988,100    | 60,000 | 10,900 | 6000(+) | 17500             | 50-55,000         |
| ARMED FORCES        |            |        |        |         |                   |                   |
| ARMY                | 321,000    | 41,000 | 8,500  | 6000    | 14,500            | 40,000            |
| AIR FORCE           | 184,600    | 19,000 | 2400   | 800     | 3000              | 10-15,000         |
| TANKS               | 21870      | 930    | 233    | 35      | 702               | 340               |
| APCs                | 25,975     | 770    | 63     | 63      | 1760              | 714               |
| COMBAT AIRCRAFT     | 1736       | 164    | 52     | -       | 89(+200 IN STORE) | 135(+35 IN STORE) |
| ATAACK HEPTR        | 700        | -      | 9      | 4-5     | -                 | 42                |
| PARA MILITARY (RES) | 20,000,000 | 12,000 | 5,000  | 1,200   | -                 | 18-20,000         |



**Source:** *The Military Balance, 2002-2003*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

**Tajikistan** has faced severe regional, clan and tribal fragmentations, with the opposition fighting against the dominance of Khujent-Kulyab clans, the old Soviet elite. Possessing the weakest Armed Forces, it was the worst sufferer of the division of the Soviet Armed Forces, as it had hardly any forces located on its territory.

It was expected by experts that **Turkmenistan** would be the first country to extricate itself from the economic decline, because of proven oil and natural gas reserves. It has been the least dependent on Russia from the very beginning, striking deals with a number of countries and multi national companies, for exploration, extraction and export of oil and gas. The high degree of success with which Turkmenistan integrated itself economically with the world community was the main factor for President Niyazov to decide on an independent course with respect to the CIS framework. It preferred to conduct all relations on a bilateral basis, and not to join any collective set up. Turkmenistan established its Armed Forces under joint command with Russia, and signed an agreement in Jun 1992 under which Russia was to assist Turkmenistan in establishing its own military. President Niyazov has stated that the country faced no threat in the near future, and did not require a strong defence machine. He also stated that the country faced no threat from Islamic fundamentalism.

**Kazakhstan** has been able to establish itself as a nation with its own interests and goals, over the last 12 years. The core element of Kazakh foreign policy is 'integration', used as a tool of foreign and security policies. It has been the founder member of the CIS, and has advanced initiative for the formation of a Eurasian Union, Central Asian Union, and the Conference on Coordination and Trust Measures etc. It has published its strategy for the future as Strategy 2030. Main features are as follows:-

- National Security.
- Internal stability and consolidation of society.
- Economic growth based on an open market economy.
- Health, education and well-being of citizens.
- Energy resources.
- Infrastructure, especially transportation and communication.
- A professional state.

National security occupies primacy in its strategy. It comprises five main components: reliable and friendly relations with neighbours, improved relations with main industrial democracies, use of help and assistance of international institutions, like UNO, IMF, World Bank etc, use of natural resources, and development of sense of patriotism and country

loyalty. Kazakhstan is against military solution to any conflict. It finds the policy of integration as the best weapon that ensures protection of national interests and power parity. Strong demographic and migration policies are among the important national security priorities, to slow the population decline. Kazakhstan proposed the formation of a Eurasian Community (EAC) in 1994, presented as an alternative to the 'clash of civilisations' theory. "The idea of Eurasianism facilitates security in the nations of the continent, because it urges both key states of the region - Kazakhstan and Russia, as well as many other nations to pursue common unifying sentiments."<sup>78</sup> However, the idea has not found favour with other states of the region and Russia.

### **CIS and Regional Security**

The CIS came into being in Dec 1991, with eleven members, leaving Georgia and the Baltic states. It has had a turbulent and confused evolution since then. It offered major economic advantages to the member states by utilising the erstwhile Soviet space and networks for trade, markets and security. The Central Asian states were economically weak and had no access to any markets other than those within the CIS space. They looked at Russia for help and assistance in the economic and security fields to face the enormous challenges being encountered by these nascent states. The 25 million strong Russian Diaspora was the main reason for Russia to get involved in the region in the initial phase. It was only after a change in foreign policy in 1993 that Russia started paying greater attention to creating a strong CIS, through which it could maintain its influence over the former Soviet space. The CIS adopted its charter during the Jan 1993 meet at Minsk, initiating the process of integration within the CIS. A treaty on economic union was signed by the CIS states in September 1993 at Moscow, providing free movement of commodities, capital and labour between the member states.

Integration into the CIS framework was found more beneficial because of the economic needs of the states, the poor state and type of their economies, transportation networks and market linkages within the CIS group of countries. However, the states met with disappointment at being left out by Russia to fend for themselves. In spite of such a disappointment, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgystan signed the CIS Charter in Jan 1993. Turkmenistan drifted away from CIS, mainly because of its relative economic success. The Collective Security Treaty- 1992 was signed by six states – Russia, Tajikistan,

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<sup>78</sup> Eleukenov, Dastan, " Perspectives on Security in Kazakhstan", in Berstch, et. al.,ed., n. 1, pp. 240-255, p.

Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Armenia, wherein aggression or threat to aggression against any of the signatories was considered as a threat to all of them. Turkmenistan abstained from signing the treaty, and instead gave priority to bilateral cooperation with Russia. The CIS Collective Security Treaty mainly relies on Russian military for security guarantees. This treaty was renewed in 2000, though Uzbekistan is no more a member. Uzbekistan withdrew from the treaty in 1999, but maintained some military ties with Russia as most of its military hardware comes from there. Effective development of a regional security framework on the foundations of only Central Asian states is unlikely in the near future, given the strong military and economic dependence of at least some of these countries on Russia and their own differing perceptions of regional security.

The CIS has suffered a number of problems from its inception stage. The economic union could not take place because of differing level of development in each state, and the different methodology adopted for restructuring their respective economies. Their pace of development was also different, resulting in distinct national priorities and interests at each stage of development. A weak Russian economy has also been a major factor, which forced Russia to look inwards at the critical juncture when the CIS states wanted its assistance the most. There has always been a fear of Russian domination, with each state believing that for their distinct national identity to emerge, they had to have independent economies. Thus, the CIS has been unable to emerge as a strong entity in the region. The US entry in the region and an increased participation of member states in the NATO programmes have made the Commonwealth redundant.

Another major factor that has inhibited the growth of CIS is differing perception of the organisation. While Russia views cooperation under the CIS framework from a security point of view, the Central Asian states view this as an economic cooperation, and not defence cooperation. A large number of agreements - more than 100 have been signed by the CIS member states, but most of them have remained on paper only, with the Commonwealth lacking any mechanism for their implementation. "A number of declarations and agreed documents have been signed by the member states of the CIS; very limited results have been achieved by the member states in creating a joint air defence system, collective protection of borders, or in peacekeeping operations. They have also failed to create an effective

mechanism for implementing collective decisions on security issues or draft programmes of military- technology and military-economic cooperation.”<sup>79</sup>

The CIS states made an effort to coordinate their economic relations and development at the regional level. However, even in that case, nothing concrete has really emerged. All the Central Asian states are going their own independent way. Moreover, there has been very little commonality in the perception of the Central Asian states regarding their defence needs. Russia had signed bilateral military cooperation agreements with all the Central Asian states in 1992. The treaties with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan hold that the signatories should preserve a joint military strategic space. The treaty with Turkmenistan is less comprehensive. Because of divided boundaries with trans-national tribal loyalties, it was not expected that the Central Asian states would become self sufficient and viable entities early. An internal conflict in one state would have all the ingredients to engulf the neighbouring states as well.

Some states in the region, especially Uzbekistan have been opposing any effective steps at deepening of collective defence. Tajikistan is an exception in this regard, where Russian military presence has been further intensified because of the volatile Afghan situation. The Taliban successes in Afghanistan had resulted in an improvement in Russian-Central Asian security and political cooperation, which has been further intensified after 11 September, 2001. However, American troops in the region are seen as diminishing Russian influence.

All the Central Asian states are prone to instability; however, Tajikistan is the most unstable, still recovering from the civil war. In the interest of keeping peace and stability in the Central Asian Region, on 15 December 95 the heads of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan agreed to form a peacekeeping battalion "Centrasbat" using the units of these countries under the aegis of UN. At present Centrasbat is operational and has been exercised twice in 1997 and 1998. On receipt of mandate of the UN for Centrasbat to participate in peacekeeping operations, the battalion will concentrate with the necessary military and technical equipment and thereafter be despatched for peacekeeping operations under the aegis of the UN. Now Tajikistan is also likely to form the part of Centrasbat. In 2001, the name of Centrasbat has been changed to Regional Cooperation.

Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan signed an agreement in Oct 1998 promising mutual assistance in the event of one of their countries being seriously threatened by militant Islamic

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<sup>79</sup> Chufirin, Gennady, "Asia as a Factor in Russia's International Posture" in Chufirin, Gennady, ed., n. 17, p. 478.



forces. However, such efforts at cooperation have been short-lived, mainly because of serious inter-state, inter-ethnic and intra-state rivalry and antagonism, especially between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. This was well illustrated in Nov 1998 revolt in Khojent, a major city in North Tajikistan, which was staged from across the border in Uzbekistan. Tajikistan blamed Uzbekistan for the revolt, and their relations became highly strained. However, this event confirmed the suspicions and fears of other Central Asian states about Uzbekistan's designs to become a regional power in Central Asia, forcing them to further intensify their defence and security cooperation with Russia. Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan and Tajikistan have continued to maintain close security relations with Russia. Even Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, although resisting any efforts at any multi-lateral CIS defence structures, have not been against bilateral defence cooperation with Russia. The threat of a militant and resurgent Islam from the South has largely forced the Central Asian states to cooperate with each other and accept the Russian defence umbrella.

## ***CHAPTER III***

### CHAPTER III

#### ISLAMIC REVIVALISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM

##### Spread of Islam in Central Asia

Islam is the latest religion to reach Central Asia. Within 100 years of the death of the Prophet Muhammad, i.e. by 750 A. D. the Muslim Arabs had expanded their political state far beyond the Arab lands. Consequently, the Muslim community of believers - umma, began to encompass ethnicities beyond the Arabs themselves. The first non-Arabs to accept Islam in large numbers were the Persians, whose empire the Arab forces defeated in a series of battles during 637-651. Far more numerous than the Arabs, and with a tradition of kingship and bureaucracy going back for many centuries, the Persians altered the character of Islam in southwest Asia. "As Richard N. Frye has put it, the influx of Persians into the umma 'broke the equation that Arab equals Muslim.' He calls this process the 'internationalisation' of Islam."<sup>80</sup> The Islamic world was ruled mostly by Turkish dynasties, with their empire extending to such distant places as Africa and the Indian sub-continent.

"The introduction of Islam into Central Asia went through roughly three stages: force of arms and alms; the madarsas; and Sufism."<sup>81</sup> Those Central Asians farthest from the border of Islamic lands were the last to adopt Islam and retained their traditional beliefs to the greatest degree. Volga Tatars converted the Kazakh and Kyrgys of the steppe to Islam only in the late 18th-early 19th centuries thanks to policies of Catherine II of Russia (1762-96), who apparently hoped that Islam would soften those populations and make them more receptive to the Tsarist Empire. These communities even today follow most of their pre-Islamic customs, and are the least affected by fundamentalism.

Central Asians are predominantly Sunnis of the Hanafi sect. Shias are a small minority in some of the old cities like Bukhara and Samarqand and some parts of Tajikistan. Sufism has been a major source of expansion of Islam in Central Asia, especially in the nomad people, through a system of Sufi orders or tariqas. Naqshbandi tariqa, believing in missionary work and political activism, has been the most influential of these. "In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Naqshbandi political activism has played a major role in influencing militant Islamic

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<sup>80</sup> Paksoy, H. B., n. 10.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

movements in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and the Fergana Valley.”<sup>82</sup> “Thus two branches of Islam emerged in Central Asia: the traditional, conservative, scholarly Islam of the settled areas, and the much looser, less restrictive Islam of the nomads that still favoured Sufism and pre-Islamic traditions.”<sup>83</sup>

Central Asia is not such a homogenous belt of Muslim nations, as is perceived by many. While important religious and cultural threads run through the fabric of the region, the region’s complexity is marked by its diversity and lack of uniform views. Among the most distinct differences, which characterise Central Asia is the Turkish/Persian cultural and linguistic divide. The region is dominated by the Turkish speaking populations, which reside in four of the five states of the region. The Persians reside in Tajikistan and inhabit the Persian centers of Bukhara and Samarqand, which lie in present day Uzbekistan. In addition, the region’s population is a mix of indigenous and migratory groups. The population could also be divided between two lifestyles until the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the nomadic and sedentary. The nomadic people occupied the Northern steppe of present day Kazakhstan and Kyrgystan, and the extreme South of Turkmenistan, while the settled communities generally remained in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Generally, the Northern population was less orthodox in their interpretation and practice of Islam, while people of the more settled areas were more faithful in adherence to Islamic traditions. Thus, “Central Asia once belonged to a common Islamic civilisation that encompassed portions of Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Xinjiang, the Caucasus and the Volga region, and this distinctive heritage is likely to exert a substantial influence on the external relations of the new Central Asian governments.”<sup>84</sup>

### Islam Under Soviet Union

After the Oct 1917 Revolution, the Bolsheviks followed an anti-religion strategy, as the orthodox church had wielded considerable power under the Tsar, and the Turkish Caliphate held sway over Muslims of the Central Asian region. The Communists followed a radical programme of separating religion from the state, as they believed that religion was an obstacle to modernisation and social development. The mosques, Sharia courts and religious schools were closed down, members of the clergy persecuted, and religious endowment lands (wakfs) were confiscated. It resulted in the Basmachi revolution in 1918, involving the

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<sup>82</sup> Ahmed Rashid, n 13, p. 28.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p. 29.

<sup>84</sup> Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, n. 12, p. 45.

Mujahideen Sufis, which started dying down after 1924, until it ended completely in 1928. The Soviet rulers, on assumption of power, attempted to break any sense of national identity under its National Delimitation policy. New boundaries cutting across the region's most important defining parameters – clan and tribe, were established resulting in somewhat artificial national structures that exist today.

The anti-Islamic campaign was halted in 1924 for some time. However, when a relative degree of support and trust was achieved, the Communists reverted to their long-term anti-religion strategy. The wakf properties were nationalised and Islamic schools banned, while Latin script replaced Arabic in teaching and publishing. Much of the religious officialdom was dispersed through relocation, exile, imprisonment and assassination. The harsh treatment of Muslims continued in the 1930s, though mosques continued to function, and clerics continued to preach, but in vastly reduced numbers and under conditions of persistent persecution. “Under Stalin, the elimination of the outward attributes of Islam was important, thus three of the five pillars of Islam – zakat, hajj and Ramadan fasts were outlawed.”<sup>85</sup>

The need for Muslim support in the Second World War forced the government to cease anti-religion activities, and a special directorate of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) was created, with a Mufti as its head. “The Muftiate was essentially designed to undermine and even attempt to destroy Islam, particularly the connection between the national and religious identities, and to create a token, regulated, officially appointed clergy, in order to manage the few remaining religious institutions, and after 1955 to improve relations with friendly Muslim countries.”<sup>86</sup> “From the late 1930s until 1990 there were only two madaras in Central Asia, with student strength of 100 to 200. Total number of operating mosques, according to varying Soviet statistics, numbered around one hundred. The Koran was published less than half a dozen times until 1984 in limited quantities.”<sup>87</sup> The entire clergy was under the total control of the state. The bureaucratic apparatus of the center selected the students for training and the graduating clergy were then assigned by the state apparatus to practice religion, the state paying them monthly salary. All ‘official’ clergy reported to the concerned Muftiate.

However, “despite years of reprisal and persecution in the USSR, Islam managed to

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<sup>85</sup> Tazmini, Ghonchen, n. 7, p. 64.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p. 65.

preserve its spirit as a way of life that culturally defined every facet of the believer's existence."<sup>88</sup> By 1960, the Communist Party leadership had again started attacking religion. Khrushchev issued a decree in Mar 1961 entitled, 'On the Strict Observance of the Laws on Religious Cults', launching a three-fold strategy: attack to be launched against the clergy; existing anti-religion laws to be thoroughly implemented; and, penalties for religious offences to be harsher. This remained the official policy until perestroika was launched.

One of the results of the anti-religion policy was that the new generations grew up in almost total ignorance of the religious precepts. They made do with hearsay, and smuggled books often containing eclectic information. Information pertaining to religious practices continued to be provided in secret, under pain of authoritarian repercussions. Thus, Islam survived as a cultural-religious phenomenon during the years of militant atheism under Soviet rule.

Islam based on the Holy Koran and the Hadith (Mohammedan Traditions) is mostly prevalent in urban areas in Central Asia, where access to literacy and literary works is possible, while relying heavily on local traditions is more prevalent in the rural masses, which lack such access. The latter version thrives with the nomadic people, who do not have permanent settlement and permanent clergy. However, both versions are complementary and a hybrid variety of Islam has emerged in Central Asia as a result. The folklore, thus created by the fusion of the two, could not be destroyed by the Soviet regime. "The national identities were stressed during the Soviet rule; however, there was a symbiosis between inherited Islamic traditions and national identities"<sup>89</sup>, which did not allow Islam to be eradicated, and which later ensured the growth of Islam in the aftermath of Soviet collapse.

Inevitable fallout of perestroika and glasnost launched by Gorbachev was the revival of Islam, forcing the government to back away from its anti-religion policies. During the first phase of reforms from 1985 to 1988, Gorbachev followed his predecessor's policy on religion, and even blamed Islam for Central Asian backwardness. However, it is during the second phase of reforms from 1988 to 1991, that a retreating Communist Party granted the republics more control over the ideological sphere, which included policies concerning religion. More control was granted to republican leaders over the ideological sphere, in a bid

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<sup>87</sup> Paksoy, H. B., "The Question of Religious Fundamentalism In Central Asia", on website <http://www.ku.edu/~ibetext/txts/paksoy-6/index.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Tazmini, Ghonchen, n. 7, p. 65.

<sup>89</sup> Akbarzadeh, Shahram, "Political Islam in Kyrgystan and Turkmenistan", *Central Asian Survey*, 2001, 20(4), pp. 451- 465, p. 453.

to salvage the situation. The wakf was re-established during this period, mosques were rebuilt or new ones were constructed, and ordinary Muslims were educated on the history and philosophy of Islam. This process of enlightenment grew alongside an upsurge in nationalist sentiments, both closely inter-related, and intertwined. By 1999, it had resulted in the politicisation of Islam and its emergence as an important political force. Gorbachev did not anticipate such an outcome.

### **Islamic Revivalism**

The disintegration of USSR gave an opportunity to the Central Asians to reconnect spiritually and culturally with the Islamic past. "Almost the first visitors to the independent Central Asian republics were Islamic missionaries from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and elsewhere, who helped build thousands of mosques, and distributed free copies of Koran translated into Russian and other languages."<sup>90</sup> The stage was thus set for Islamic revival in Central Asia, with its emergence as a viable political force. In contrast to the general pattern of Islamic revivalism in the rest of the world, rural folk in Central Asia are the ones who are more attracted to Islamic revival, rather than the urban population. This could be attributed to the success achieved by the Soviet regime in creating a creed of secular urban intelligentsia. The true nature of the effect of Islamic revivalism on these states will emerge only after they have been able to overcome the domestic crises afflicting them currently. This revivalism is closely related to the recognition of national identity and cultural heritage. There has been a drastic increase in the construction of mosques, Islamic schools and the emergence of Islamic rituals. The madarsas offered courses in Arabic, Sharia law and Islamic history. This was indeed a revival of Islam, which to some Western writers meant a move towards Islamic fundamentalism. However, that has not been the case, at least as of now. It was an expression of belief in their faith and a will to practice their religion, which right had been suppressed for 70 years.

All the Central Asian states are multi-ethnic, who view Islam as a symbol of national unity. The polity recognizes the importance and role of Islam in the society, resulting in the leaders adopting a pragmatic attitude and policy towards Islam. The unifying message of Islam has been accepted by all the states, as part of their state policy, while the state has tended to act as the guardian of Islam. However, all the states wanted to keep a strict control on all Islamic activities, because of the threat it posed to the nomenclatura. Moreover, due to

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<sup>90</sup> Ahmed Rashid, n. 13, p. 5.

inter ethnic differences, no state other than Uzbekistan was ready to accept the Muftiate located at Tashkent, and each state desired to have its own independent set up. Therefore, the individual states broke away from the Central Asian Muftiate, creating their own Muftiate instead. "The establishment of national Muftiate was a necessary step towards the expression of Islam as a symbol of national identity."<sup>91</sup>

The break up of the Soviet Union had generated fears of Islamic revivalism tending towards fundamentalism in Central Asia, especially in view of Islamic revolutions in neighbouring Iran and Afghanistan and the Taliban factor. This concern was warranted and genuine. "Yet so far, while the cultural aspects of Islam have been on the rise in Central Asia, its political manifestations have remained limited in scope. In fact, Islamic revivalism in the region has been largely limited to the rediscovery of culture, history and national identity."<sup>92</sup>

Foreign influence is one of the major factors for the rise of Islamic revivalism, and the two most likely schools that were possible to be propagated were: one, by the Iranian clergy and two, by the Deobandi and Wahhabi cult professed by thousands of madaras in Pakistan. "Ninety eight percent of the Muslims of Central Asia are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi School of law."<sup>93</sup> Therefore, Iran with a Shiite population and a non-Turkish ethnicity has little hold and acceptability in the region. The emergence of Taliban in Afghanistan, with the avowed aim of creating Dar-ul-Islam and a Sunni following, definitely posed a threat to the republics. However, even this influence of Talibanised thinking should have little chances of success, as the Central Asian states are secular in outlook, have a tight control over their society, and the ruling class consists of the old Soviet nomenclatura elite. Moreover, Central Asia has a Sufi cult, which espouses tolerance for all religions. The Sufi cult has witnessed a revival in the recent past, with Muslims following a secular religious path. However, a large number among the youth have chosen a stricter form of religious practice, prescribed by a conservative Islam. Still others see Islam as the basis of an alternative political system. "Therefore, absence of Islamic solidarity is clearly discernible. The Islamic bond in Central Asia is highly exaggerated, while sectarian, ethnic, tribal, linguistic and national differences have been under-estimated."<sup>94</sup>

In spite of these inherent contradictions, it needs to be stated that these disparities can surely decelerate the proliferation of Islam, but cannot stop it altogether. Revival of national

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<sup>91</sup> Akbarzadeh, Shahram, n. 89, p. 457.

<sup>92</sup> Tazmini, Ghonchen, n. 7, p. 81.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p. 67.

<sup>94</sup> Ahmed Rashid, n. 13, p. 68.



and Islamic heritage has been continuing in Central Asia, along with a parallel activity in establishing a strong presence of conservative Islam. The state has been making efforts in ensuring the revival of the first kind.

With lack of democratic rights in all the states, there has been an ideological vacuum in the Central Asian society. However, as religious consciousness and awareness increases, the percentage of followers of the second type of revivalism will increase in the society, putting pressures on the state to accept an increasingly conservative brand of Islam. Islam is expected to fill the vacuum created because of denial of democracy and freedom of religion after the withdrawal of Communist ideology, acquiring deeper roots among the masses. Thus, Islamic revivalism is bound to take place. "However, under conditions of social instability and tensions, there is a persistent danger of easy conversion of 'folk Islam' to 'political Islam', and through the exploitation of the latter by international vested interests and internal opposition, into 'fundamentalist Islam'."<sup>95</sup> The vacuum left behind by the demise of the Soviet Union is yet to be filled by a strong and vibrant ideology. With no state going in for serious democratic reforms, democracy is an unlikely element to fill this vacuum. The only other ideological platform available is that of Islam. With rampant corruption, poverty and deprivation, the rural population that is suffering the most, sees Sharia rule as a vehicle for social justice and just rule. The idealistic pattern projected by the clergy is seen by many as an attractive and realistic option.

Repressive states like Uzbekistan, which do not hesitate to suppress even non-violent, moderate and forward-looking religious groups, have made extremism popular with the masses. In addition, societies encumbered with corruption, mafia and wide social and economic divide, are more prone to getting attracted to the discipline, purity and order of an Islamic society as propagated by its proponents.

### **Islam as a Political Force**

Their incarnation into new sovereign states has brought the Central Asian republics into contact with the Muslim countries of the Middle East. Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey have been actively encouraging the growth of Islam by generous funding and training of religious teachers in their institutions. To the Islamic countries in the neighbourhood, the region assumes strategic importance in terms of strategic depth in the concept of an all-encompassing Islamic bloc. The Central Asian states are also conscious of the Muslim card in

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<sup>95</sup> Kaushik, Devendra, n. 21, p., 20.

their relations with the rest of the world. While following a secular policy at home, they have tried to develop economic relations with Muslim countries, in search of economic aid and funds. The internal economic problems in these states are to a certain extent responsible for pushing them towards Islam. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where the Muslim population is more devout and homogenous, have shown a lot of motivation in pursuing close contacts with the Gulf states. Kyrgystan has also made efforts to attract Saudi money, while Kazakhstan has been following a cautious course. Overall, the republics have been cautious in playing the 'Islamic card'. The problem is "most of the aid programmes of Muslim countries are linked to the projects designed to propagate faith, and in the light of the dangers of Islamic extremism, the republics have been more eager to work with the rest of the world instead."<sup>96</sup>

By end of 1990, a wave of revival of Islam had come about in Central Asia. However, this was radicalised by the arrival of the outside actors – Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey - along with their money and preachers. The region saw a flurry of activity of various groups from Muslim countries, to spread their influence through the propagation of Islam. The Saudis have had intensive contacts, especially in Uzbekistan; they distributed copies of Korans free of cost, donated money for construction of mosques and madarsas, and transferred funds for Islamic teaching. In fact, the emergence of new Muslim majority countries in the heart of Asia aroused great hope and enthusiasm in neighbouring countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan. The Central Asians are provided with free education and a living place in the Deobandi madarsas in Pakistan, where conservative form of Islam is preached. It is here that the jihadis are being trained. However, even in the schools where students come from far and wide to study Islamic ideology, the inter-ethnic tensions prevalent in Central Asia are evident. "While most of the Tajik recruits to these madarsas followed the Tajik nationalism being practised by Tajik commander Ahmad Shah Masud; the Uzbek militants gravitated towards radicalism of the Pakistan-Afghanistan Pashtuns led later by Taliban."<sup>97</sup>

The Central Asian leadership, failed to adapt its policies as per the changing situation, and continued with their repressive policies, leaving the ideological vacuum intact to be exploited by Islamic extremist elements. The arrival of Islam was inevitable due to the power vacuum created in the region because of Soviet disintegration; what was expected from the

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<sup>96</sup> Tazmini, Ghonchen, n. 7, p. 76.

<sup>97</sup> Ahmed Rashid, n. 13, p. 45.

ruling elite was channelising it along the right direction. The leadership continued to depend on and encourage 'official Islam', which itself was based on conservatism, while making no efforts to prop up Sufism, or other moderate aspects of Islam against the conservative Wahhabi or Deobandi teachings. Moreover, the states had no resources and were no match for the aggressive foreign preachers. In a way, the Muftiates also supported conservative Wahhabi Islam, because they practised and preached Islam as per the published material, which is of the conservative variety, thus making the task of foreign mercenaries and preachers that much easier. 'Official Islam' also assisted the suppression and denigration of Sufism, which was the aim of the Wahhabis.

The centralisation of Islam as has been done by the Central Asian states is fraught with severe consequences quite the reverse of what was intended. While the states centralised Islam to ensure that its interpretation is correct and as per the state's needs; however, this move has catapulted Islam to the centre stage of political activity, as it is expected to provide guidance for appropriate social behaviour, and ultimately the government. Moreover, the Muftiate interprets Islam as per the Koran and the Hadith, and not as per the local customs; thus, inadvertently, the government is supporting the preaching of this kind of Islam that may sit for judgment on the state's activities. This is an unpalatable situation. This process facilitates the emergence of political Islam, as an independent political order. In any case, this kind of Islam is on the rise in Central Asia. With the Muftiate sponsoring only scripted Islam, folklore Islam (Sufism being its part), does not have a political influence in the state. Therefore, the state is indirectly providing state patronage to scripted Islam, while neglecting the other form, which may result in the slow death of folklore Islam and Sufism in these states. A predominant scripted and politicised Islam will thus be a dangerous trend for these states, as has been evidenced in the Fergana Valley (Osh) by the Kyrgyz government in respect of the Uzbek population there.

However, aware of the potency of religion, the ruling elite have taken control over religious institutions and have adopted measures to prevent politicisation of Islam. They have adopted all the pretensions of a good and faithful Muslim, while being vary of religious activism. Kazakhstan with a strong Russian ethnic population has to follow a strictly secular policy. Kyrgyzstan has faced random acts of terrorism, in the name of Islam, mainly by Uzbek elements. Turkmenistan has introduced teaching of Islamic history in schools, and has permitted traditional Muslim marriages (polygamy). Uzbekistan has the strongest Islamic

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traditions, where the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan has taken over the functions that the soviet era board had performed. However, some Muslims established their own mosques outside the purview of the Muslim Board, which was seen as a threat by President Karimov. He banned the IRP in 1992, along with a vigorous campaign against 'unofficial' Islam. The government began a major crackdown in 1994, which intensified in 1997 in almost all the cities of Fergana Valley. Though the government is keen to preserve secularism and eliminate 'politicised' Islam, its repressive policies have not been entirely successful. In fact, these policies are dangerous and could backfire and strengthen Islamic extremism. Therefore, the threat of extremism continues in Uzbekistan.

The events of spring – autumn 1992 in Tajikistan, which saw a bloody fight between the government forces and the opposition, the latter inspired and armed by militant Iranian and Afghan Islamists with the purpose of furthering the cause of Islam, indicated towards radicalisation of Islamic movement. However, though the Islamists played up the ideological dimension of the conflict, the opposition was driven as much by clan rivalries, the growth of localism and regionalism as by their desire to establish a theocratic state based on Islamic principles. "Local people saw the opposition as first representing the interests of particular regions and clans, and as an Islamic party second."<sup>98</sup>

"In the Tajik civil war between the ex-Communist ruling elite and the coalition of Islamic opposition parties, the latter was receiving aid and sanctuary in neighbouring Afghanistan, where various Mujahideen factions had come to power in April 1992. The Tajik Islamists were also getting support from Pakistan and Iran."<sup>99</sup> The ex-Communist ruling elite in all other Central Asian republics were afraid of the spread of the 'Tajik disease.' While they had come to terms with social and cultural resurgence of Islam, President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan played a central role in the signing of the collective security treaty in Tashkent in May 1992 for the protection of the CIS borders. In August 1992, an agreement was signed between Russia and Tajikistan whereby Russia deployed its 201st Motorised Rifle Division in Tajikistan, to protect the Tajik-Afghan border to keep the Islamic militants at bay. The Islamic elements in Tajikistan lost to these forces and the ex-Communists were back into power. After the end of civil war in Tajikistan in 1992, the government launched a campaign of persecution and suppression. However, small-scale guerrilla warfare has continued, killing thousands and rendering many homeless. The situation became more precarious after the Taliban captured power in Afghanistan. President

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<sup>98</sup> Tazmini, Ghonchen, n. 7, p. 69.

Rakhmonov, under pressure from the Russians signed a ceasefire agreement in 1996. The Russians with a 25,000 strong force, assisted by Uzbek military have provided a reasonable amount of security along the Tajik-Afghan border. However, sporadic incidents have continued thereafter, which have seen a sharp downfall after the ouster of Taliban from Afghanistan.

The Central Asian leaders viewed the civil war in Tajikistan as evidence of the danger posed by the rise of fundamentalism. Their apprehension of the dangers posed by political Islam taking deep roots in the region has spurred the leaders to impose totalitarian and repressive state machinery, with limitations on civil liberties. The West, wary of the spread of militant Islam, has not objected to the suppression of Human Rights in these states. The region's leadership has tried to move closer to the West by espousing the cause of a secular state. Simultaneously, they have preferred to court the official Islamic establishment in the hope of establishing their Islamic credentials. This policy of encouraging cultural Islamisation, while simultaneously curbing opportunities for emergence of Islam as a political force is fraught with danger. Attempts to limit and control Islam in the region and particularly to nip fundamentalism in the bud without simultaneous attempts to reverse the social and economic decline is likely to create a potentially explosive situation. A situation of Islamists gaining an upper hand may be possible to avoid, if Islam gets adequate opportunities for political participation, in addition to meeting the social and economic aspirations of the people, as suppression of any Islamic activity outside the officially sanctioned ones can also make the regimes susceptible to radical Islam.

However, with political Islam not being homogeneously strong in all parts of Central Asia, the failure of Islam in becoming a unifying political force in any part of the world, including the Middle East, and the complex ethnic composition of Central Asia, an Islamic resurgence is at best a distant reality. The leaders of the republics have also recognised the importance of Islam in shaping their identities. Most of the Central Asian leaders have committed themselves to the separation of state and religion. While permitting its growth as a religion, encouraging the building of mosques and the establishment of religious schools and training colleges, they have resisted any politicisation of Islam. However, if the Central Asian regimes fail to deliver and the populations or sections of population feel repressed and find the local authorities incapable of satisfying their social and economic needs, Islam could grow as a vehicle of protest against Central Asian regimes. This trend has been clearly

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<sup>99</sup> Bakshi, Jyotsna , n. 2, p. 1553.

discernible in other Islamic countries as well, where Islam has often become the primary vehicle for organised opposition against failing regimes.

Islam has played an important role as a component of Central Asian identity, and has proved to be a significant factor while dealing with Russia. Islam is, in fact, an element of nationalism, and Islamic renaissance and national rebirth are closely intertwined within each of the states. Islam is seen as a means of national self-determination, and an instrument of spiritual liberation. Therefore, Islamic consciousness along with nationalistic fervour is likely to help build Central Asia's national and regional identities in times to come.

Historically, Central Asians have lacked nationalism, people prefer mahalla, clan and regional ties. Therefore, though the present states have been carved based on ethno-linguistic criteria during the Communist regime, it has at best produced mixed results. Thus, in Central Asia, religion – namely a more activist version of Islam – seems the only realistic opportunity for any likely popular mobilisation against the ruling regimes. It is also clear that “in areas where the rural population has been growing faster than the more Europeanised urban populations; contestation of corrupt authority and the idea of ‘social justice’ under the guise of Sharia are also likely to assume a more political form.”<sup>100</sup>

This possibility is to be seen in the context of the efforts of Taliban and other international fundamentalist organisations, active in Pakistan and Southern Afghanistan. Their terrorists are active in various parts of the world, wherever in their view the local Muslim population does not have adequate political freedom and/ or political space. This is precisely the vulnerable spot in Central Asia. The civil war in Afghanistan has raised the spectre of ‘jihad’ in Central Asia, due to its geographical and ethnic contiguity to Afghanistan.

“Jihad is of two types: one, the greater jihad that is inward-seeking, the effort to become a better human being; and two, the lesser jihad, as a rebellion against an unjust ruler, becoming the means to mobilise political and social struggle.”<sup>101</sup> However, all the fundamentalist organisations in the world profess lesser jihad, ignoring the greater jihad. It is this factor, which is the most worrying for Central Asia, as a number of international fundamentalist organisations have made deep inroads in the region. Most foreign preachers profess the lesser jihad. Most of the Central Asians who are taught religious beliefs in Pakistani madarsa machinery, functional all over its Northern tribal belt have been

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<sup>100</sup> Jones, Scott A., n.1, p. 7.

<sup>101</sup> Ahmed Rashid, n. 13, p. 2.

indoctrinated to fight for the lesser jihad. The ferment in Fergana Valley, which transcends borders of three states of Tajikistan, Kyrgystan and Uzbekistan, is a future hot spot. Wahhabism, adopted by the Saudi royal family as the state law, has played an important role in fermenting trouble in Fergana Valley. "The most significant ideological contribution to Sunni Islam was the reintroduction of jihad in the later half of 20<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>102</sup>

### **Islamic Fundamentalism**

At the time of break up of Soviet Union, the major Muslim countries of the region – Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey attempted to create their own areas of influence in the region. While Turkey has been propagating moderate Islam, acceptable to the West, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have made serious attempts to Islamise the region, through the spread of Wahhabi Islam. They have dispatched millions of copies of Koran, and donated large sums of money for the construction of religious establishments. Pakistan has set aside space for Central Asian students in its madarsas. The Central Asian leadership has been more forthcoming in accepting aid from these Sunni countries, rather than Shia Iran. The latter has focused on two principal objectives: promotion of cultural and historical ties in an effort to help Central Asian states rediscover Islamic heritage; and, development of mutually beneficial economic relations with these republics, including expansion of land transportation links for oil and gas pipelines. Iran, being a Shia state lacks real leverage in Central Asia.

Afghanistan and Pakistan offer a more credible threat for Central Asian stability, with the nationalities, tribes and clans transcending international borders and the presence of the threat of Taliban and Islamic fundamentalism. The Taliban type of fundamentalist organisations are only concerned with theology, and are insensitive to Islamic philosophy, mysticism, and local traditions and customs. They also want to remove any connections with history and culture of that region. Even the theology is ignored when it is politically expedient. Though consumption of intoxicants including opium is prohibited under Islamic laws, the successive regimes in Pakistan and the Taliban in Afghanistan, with full knowledge of the Saudi clergy, have permitted opium to be grown as a cash crop, when most of the output is consumed in Muslim countries.

At present, the Islamic fundamentalist forces are lying low, as they find the enemy more powerful. However, this could be considered as preparation time for yet another battle

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid, p. 44.

for supremacy. "Radical Islam holds that, as long as and in so far as the Muslims are defeated and thus unable to change the status quo, in their interest they would have to accept ceasefire for shorter or longer periods which would then be terminated as soon as they regained strength."<sup>103</sup>

The entry of outside powers in the region has changed the geopolitical map of Central Asia. The Islamic threat in the region has introduced a new type of 'Great Game', where each of the Central Asian states now faces a direct threat from Islamic extremist forces; starting a new type of competition between USA, China, and Russia in their efforts to provide military assistance to the Central Asian states. However, these major powers are making little efforts to improve the pathetic state of their economic, social and political conditions.

Presently, the moderate variant of Islam seems to be in control in Central Asia; till how long will they remain is yet to be seen. The socio-economic situation in the region is likely to deteriorate further; hence, the region is likely to pass through serious socio-economic traumas, resulting in efforts at derailing the process of steering Islam towards a moderate course. In the long term, there is a substantial possibility of the rise of radical Islam in at least some of the countries, especially Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. The present urban population has been schooled in secular and socialist thoughts, and is least affected by radical Islamic propaganda. However, the younger generation has not undergone any such indoctrination, and is exposed to Islamic influence. The Central Asian states may remain secular till a new generation takes over; and if at that stage the urban population is won over by radical Islam, there is a strong case for radical Islam coming to power in states in Central Asia.

In spite of the foregoing, Islamic fundamentalism may not be able to pose a serious threat to the region's stability in the near future, due to international campaign against terrorism with its epicentre in Afghanistan and Northern Pakistan, and the presence of Russian and American forces in the region as a guarantee of national sovereignty for the Central Asian states. Therefore, given the moderate nature of Islam in the region, it is safe to assume that Islam is not likely to become a contending force in the region, at least in the short term. With most states having religious and ethnic disparities, with strong clan, tribal and regional loyalties, and the ruling elite vary of Islamic revivalism; it is highly unlikely that radical Islam could grow as a movement. This likelihood has been further reduced with the defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and with heavy international commitment in the region.

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<sup>103</sup> Mishra, Amalendu, "Shanghai Five: The Emerging Alliance", *Central Asian Survey*, 2001, 20(3), pp. 305-



Islamic extremism can only take roots in the region as a result of popular disenchantment and dissatisfaction with the government, when the latter is unable to deliver the social and economic needs of the people, and due to poor governance and corruption. In that scenario, politicised Islam can become a vehicle for social justice and for the opposition to take on the government. Corrupt and autocratic leadership, coupled with lack of economic opportunities have led to the rise of militant oppositions in Central Asia, with the young joining militant Islamic organisations in large numbers not only in the more conservative Uzbekistan but also in other states like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

### *Islamic Fundamentalism in Uzbekistan -IMU*

At the time of the collapse of USSR, and just prior to it, there was euphoria in Islamic circles because of a certain amount of freedom of religion. As a result, a number of religious groups and parties emerged in Uzbekistan. Historically, Uzbekistan has been the cradle for Muslim learning and culture, and therefore, it was natural for people to imagine a return to old times, with Samarqand and Tashkent as the seats of learning for the Muslim world. One such party, the 'Adolat' (Justice Party) led by Tahir Yuldashev desired to establish law and order based on Sharia. The party put across certain demands to the Government of Uzbekistan, which included declaration of Islam as state religion and recognition of all opposition organisations. The ruling elite perceived this as a threat to their own existence and authority, and as a confrontationalist attitude of the religious parties. Repression soon followed and the party was banned. Most of its leadership was arrested, but the main leader Tahir Yuldashev escaped to Tajikistan, joining the opposition in the civil war there. The other prominent opposition leader was Juma Namangani, who had served as a paratrooper in the Soviet Army in Afghanistan. His attitude was shaped during this tenure. He was deeply impressed with the Islamic groups in Afghanistan, becoming an active propagator of the religion in Uzbekistan. He underwent training under the aegis of the Islamic opposition in Tajikistan at their camps in Afghanistan, and at Peshawar at the behest of Pakistani and Saudi intelligence officials. He took training in terrorism, and established training camps in civil war torn Tajikistan. Yuldashev and Namangani joined hands in 1998, forming the Islamic Movement in Uzbekistan (IMU), with the former as the political head, and the latter as the military head. In an interview in 2000, Yuldashev explained that "IMU has declared jehad (against the government of Karimov) in order to create an Islamic religious system based on

pure Sharia laws stemming directly from the Prophet – a system he did not think existed in Afghanistan or any other present day country.”<sup>104</sup> “In Uzbekistan, in particular, the elimination of all forms of opposition since 1992 has left Islam as the only viable mechanism for channelling political grievances. Mosques provide the only independent structure for organisation and mobilisation apart from the state.”<sup>105</sup>

“The IMU enjoyed support from the Taliban that included housing, political offices, training camps, and bases for military operations and recruitment.”<sup>106</sup> It is reported to have received funds from a number of sources, including the Uzbek Diaspora in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Turkey. Namangani had set up his base in Tavildara Valley in Tajikistan in 1993, which later became the IMU base in Central Asia. After the civil war ended in Tajikistan in 1997, he was forced to disperse his forces, settling down in the Garm region close to the Kyrgys border. Meanwhile, most of the Islamists just disappeared under the severe crack down on their activities by the Karimov regime. Yuldashev settled in Kabul, garnering Taliban support. IMU has operated alongside the Taliban, and “presents one of the biggest threats, for it aims to topple the regime of Karimov as part of a jihad that will reach across Central Asia.”<sup>107</sup> A spate of explosions occurred in Tashkent in 1999, ostensibly for the assassination of Karimov, allegedly carried out by the IMU. The IMU also extended its operations to the heroin trade generating huge profits to sustain itself. It shifted its base to Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998, after Taliban captured the city, and provided support to Taliban forces attacking Masud in North East Afghanistan in 2000. Namangani now had a dedicated force of more than 2000 fighters, comprising of Uzbeks, Kyrgys, Tajiks, Chechens and Uigurs from China. He had easy access to Tajikistan from Afghanistan, from where he launched his forays in the Fergana Valley in 1999, 2000 and 2001. By 2001, when the IMU again launched its raids in Fergana Valley, it had enough ‘sleepers’ and hidden weapons there itself, making the annual movement through Afghanistan and Tajikistan redundant and unnecessary. Juma Namangani was reported to be commanding Taliban-IMU forces in Taloqan, when it fell to the US-Northern Alliance forces. He is reported to have died in the fighting there.

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<sup>104</sup> Maan, Poonam, “Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan: Will It Strike Back”, *Strategic Analysis*, Jan-Mar 2002, pp. 294-304, p. 296.

<sup>105</sup> Luong, Pauline Jones and Erik Weintal, “New Friends, New Fears in Central Asia”, *Foreign Affairs*, Mar/Apr 2002, Vol. 81, No. 2, pp. 61-70, p. 65.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, p. 63-64.

<sup>107</sup> Ahmed Rashid, n. 13, p.4.

Not only Uzbeks, but also other nationalities of Central Asia are also joining the IMU. The IMU was provided with sanctuary, weapons, funds and training by the Taliban and Al Qaeda, establishing itself in the remote Pamir Mountains. However, the movement has suffered heavily as a result of September 11, 2001 attacks and US action in Afghanistan. Their main base in Mazar-e-Sharif has been destroyed, and the organisation suffered heavy casualties while fighting alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan, against the US backed forces in the war against terrorism. IMU has been linked by USA to Al Qaeda network and banned. Its funds have also dried up because of US action. The movement, though presently down, is likely to bounce back given a suitable opportunity. Its leadership has extensive contacts with the Islamic terror network in the world. Its main structure has remained intact, the training camps in Tajikistan are functional, and there is no paucity of disgruntled youth in Central Asia. IMU has suffered in a major way as a result of the war on terror, with its bases and training camps in Afghanistan destroyed. Therefore, it is more "likely to make use of its fortified camps in the Tavildara and Karategin alleys in Tajikistan and North West Frontier Province of Pakistan."<sup>108</sup> The organisation presently is reported to be lying low, recouping after the severe losses suffered in Afghan war. It has been attracting new recruits and is expanding its area of influence and operations.

The Uzbekistan government was in a bad shape when September 11, 2001 occurred, which gave it a fresh lease of life. The security partnership between USA and Uzbekistan will encourage President Karimov to carry out further reprisals against his political opponents, with US less and less critical of Human Rights violations. The US government has banned the IMU, pleasing the Uzbek regime in the process. Uzbekistan has been following an authoritarian strategy of maintaining stability, which is at best a precarious state of affairs. Karimov has received further encouragement in this regard from the USA aligning with Uzbekistan and seeking bases there. He is contemplating a Pakistan kind of relationship with USA, which is akin to the patron-client relationship mastered by the ruling elite in Central Asia. In such a scenario, the current regime would be propped up by USA, as an alternative would be worst, at least in the perception of the Americans.

The name of the IMU has recently been changed to Islamic Party of Turkistan (IPT), implying that the group has larger aims of establishing Islamic rule in the entire region of

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<sup>108</sup> Makenenko, Dr. Tamara, "Militant Islam in Central Asia and the Caucasus", in *Regional Survey of the World – Eastern Europe, Russia and Central Asia - 2002*, Second Edition, London: Europa Publications Limited, 2001, pp. 20-36, p. 21.

Turkistan, which encompasses Central Asia and Xinjiang Province of China. IPT has recruited people from all regions of Central Asia and Uighurs from Xinjiang. Principal aim of the movement still seems to be Fergana Valley (running in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) and toppling of Karimov government. "If Karimov is toppled, and parts of Fergana are occupied by Islamists, then that will create a domino effect in Central Asia, given that all other regimes are in a much weaker position than the one in Uzbekistan."<sup>109</sup> Therefore, there are all the reasons for the Islamic movement to bounce back to life as soon as US attention is diverted elsewhere.

### *Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP)*

IRP was formed in Moscow in Jun 1990 at a congress of representatives of Muslims of the Soviet Union to organise Muslims inside USSR. However, after the break-up of Soviet Union, this party was allowed to function only in Tajikistan, where also it was banned in 1992. The Tajik representatives had set up the IRP in Tajikistan in Oct 1991 illegally, with support from the anti-establishment tribes mainly. It was unable to build a mass base, as it was not able to create a madarsa culture and set up its own educational institutions mainly because Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, the main financiers of this cult, did not support the party, as the IRP was supporting Ahmad Shah Masud, a fellow Tajik, against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Moreover, Tajikistan had banned setting up of madaras there.

The Central Asian governments sought to brand the IRP as a vehicle of Islamic radicalism. However, it was able to win widespread popular support in all these republics, especially in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Though the IRP has played an active role in the ongoing civil war in Tajikistan, yet it has not openly advocated the establishment of an Islamic state. The Islamists in Tajikistan are unique to that country. Tajikistan is heir to the Basmachi movement of the 1920s, and consists of Islamists of all shades – official, unofficial, Sufi, conservative and Tajik nationalists. Tajiks had a poor sense of nationalism at the time of break up of Soviet Union, with no historical roots, scattered as they are in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan and because Tajiks tend to identify themselves with their regions and clans rather than Tajik nationalism. With the passage of time and evidence of Uzbekistan's role in its civil war in undermining Tajik nationalism, Tajik nationalism has taken deeper roots with a definite anti-Uzbek colour.

The IRP joined the ruling coalition in 1997, but it soon became a weak force, losing

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<sup>109</sup> Maan, Poonam, n.104, p. 296.

its cadre. The Taliban threat to the region, especially to Tajikistan was evident, forcing the regional leaders to provide all possible support to Masud with a view to stop the Taliban advance short of Central Asian borders. With the IRP joining the government, its influence declined and it lost its pre-eminence in Tajikistan over a period of time, as its leadership disintegrated. However, the threat from IMU even after its leadership having joined the government has not diminished substantially. The realisation that the IMU and the Hizb-ut-Tahrir Al Islami (HT) pose major threats to Tajikistan came to the world in 2001, forcing it to provide support to the Tajikistan regime.

**Hizb-ut-Tahrir Al Islami (HT)**

The HT is a highly secretive movement, which originated in the Middle East in the 1950s, with the avowed aim of uniting all Muslims under one flag – a khilafat (caliphate) by peaceful means. The organisation has penetrated deep inside Central Asian society in a very unobtrusive manner. “HT leaders believe that Central Asia has reached what they call a ‘boiling point’ and is ripe for takeover.”<sup>110</sup> “The HT operates secret, decentralised 5-7 men cells throughout Central Asia, making it extremely difficult for the authorities to penetrate the organisation.”<sup>111</sup> It makes use of the latest available technology for communication and propaganda. It claims to have penetrated deep inside the Karimov government and the Army in Uzbekistan. It draws most of its cadre from the youth and college students and dropouts. The Uzbeks are the single largest ethnic members of the organisation in Central Asia, although it is spreading in other communities also, especially in North Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, mainly in areas where Uzbek population lives.

“Unlike the IMU, the HT, which has also declared jihad in Central Asia, seeks to reunite the Central Asian republics and eventually the whole Muslim world by non-violent means with the eventual aim of establishing a caliphate similar to that established after the death of Prophet Mohammad in the seventh century Arabia.”<sup>112</sup> The Uzbek government has realised the seriousness of the threat posed by the HT. Therefore, today most of the Islamist

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<sup>110</sup> Ahmed Rashid, n. 13, p 119.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, p. 44.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

elements who are being arrested by the regime are from the HT. Its members are meted the worst treatment in jails, and are imposed the stiffest punishments by the courts. A large number of custodial deaths have been reported. The organisation, in spite of strong repressive measures continues to expand, mostly in the Uzbek population of Central Asia.

Spread of any brand of Islamic Fundamentalism in Central Asia, even that of conservative Islam is not in the interest of major powers. It constitutes a threat to USA, Russia, China and India, and leads to instability and disorder in the world at large.

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## ***CHAPTER IV***

# EURASIA





## CHAPTER IV

### INTERESTS OF FOREIGN POWERS IN CENTRAL ASIA

#### General

At the time of disintegration of the Soviet Union, some of the foreign commentators assumed that Central Asia would seek to follow either the so-called Turkish model of Western style democracy, or the Iranian model of Islamic Fundamentalism. However, none of this has happened, and the main priority for both the leaders and the population has been to preserve stability. "Far from radical attempts to abandon the Soviet political legacy, the principal innovations were cosmetic changes to the terminology of government."<sup>113</sup> The states have matured over the last decade plus, and are taking decisions based on their national interests. They no more wish to remain confined mainly to one country in their foreign relations, and have established a complex set of relationship with all the major world powers, perceiving Islamic fundamentalism to be their biggest threat.

Unlike the original 19<sup>th</sup> century 'Great Game' between Russia and Great Britain, the 20<sup>th</sup> century has a number of players, including USA, Russia, Turkey, Iran, China, forces of Islamic fundamentalism and the West. Not only are the states involved in this power game, but multi-national corporations as well. With an abundance of oil, gas and other natural resources, and the threat posed to world stability by Islamic fundamentalists the region has come onto the centre stage of international relations and power game. "Today, the 'Great Game' consists of economic competitions for jobs, pipelines, new markets, and political and religious influence. The current struggle for Eurasian resources is a complex of security, geopolitical and economic variables."<sup>114</sup> While Russia is keen to maintain its economic and political influence on its former constituents, the other neighbouring countries and the West are trying to enter the region to fill the vacuum created by Russian economic withdrawal.

#### Russia

To describe the strategic significance of Russia, Sir Halford Mackinder used the expression 'the heartland', 'the geographical pivot of history', 'the pivot area', 'the pivot state', 'the Eurasian heartland', and 'the Asiatic position of Russia' as equivalents. This shows that he regarded Russia as the key stone of modern Eurasia. "The historical forces that

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<sup>113</sup> Akiner, Shirin, n. 76, p. 110.

shaped this pivotal position of the Russian state on the Eurasian continent still exist, although in a new form, and in a new situation created by the collapse of the USSR.”<sup>115</sup> This pivotal position of Russia has been given its due importance after the shift in its policy in 1993. It has the distinct advantage of being the only state that is part of Europe, and adjoins the Middle East, South-West Asia, and Central Asia. This asset could also become a liability if chaos and disorder were to prevail in this entire region.

However, Russia has exercised control over the region for a long time, if the Tsarist and Soviet rules are included, which factor gives it certain major advantages in the region. “Russia has accumulated a number of assets in the region during the Tsarist and Soviet periods, which include, inside knowledge of local politics, and bonds of indigenous elite, extensive military and military technology engagements, heavy reliance of many of Central Asian industry on expertise from Russia, a large Russian Diaspora and the almost universal command of Russian language in the region.”<sup>116</sup> For Russia to make full use of its unique position in the region, its policy has to take into account the sensitivities and requirements of these states. However, while the Central Asian states are looking for various opportunities to boost their economic development, by way of foreign investment, Russian policy is driven by security considerations, resulting in a different set of foreign policy priorities and goals.

### *Russian National Interests in Central Asia*

Being a Eurasian nation, Russia has strong national interests in the region. The Central Asian dimension of Russian foreign policy has been given a prominent role, due to the rapidly growing political and economic role of Central Asia in contemporary international relations, and the multiple threats and challenges to Russian national interests that emanate from or can be posed through the region. “In addition to the geostrategic considerations, Russia has two major reasons for being involved in Central Asia – one, the strong Russian Diaspora in the region; and two, maintain access to important natural resources.”<sup>117</sup>

“Four influences have guided Russian policies towards the South in the 1990s: ethnic separatism in the Caucasus, rise of Islamic fundamentalism, regional and extra regional encroachments into Russia’s ‘sphere of influence’, and Russian neo-imperial impulses

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<sup>114</sup> Jones, Scott A., n. 1, p. 14.

<sup>115</sup> Maksimenko, Vladimir I., “Russia’s Assets and Liabilities in South West Asia”, in Chufrin, Gennady, ed., n. 17, pp. 157-171, p. 157.

<sup>116</sup> Baranovsky, Vladimir, “Russia and Asia: Challenges and Opportunities for National and International Security”, in Chufrin, Gennady, ed., n. 17, pp. 11-32, p. 18.

<sup>117</sup> Jones, Scott A., n. 1, p. 14.

concerning the CIS.”<sup>118</sup> The threat of Taliban, the civil war in Tajikistan, the Chechen war fuelled by extremist elements from Afghanistan-Pakistan region posing a threat to Russian sovereignty, entry of US forces in Central Asia, and Chinese penetration in the region are some of the major concerns of Russia. It has always perceived a threat to its sovereignty from the South. It is concerned about the entry of outside influence in its backyard and fears the creation of a hostile bloc of countries to the South. Preventing the emergence of such a bloc has been the centrepiece of Russian foreign policy in Central Asia.

“Among the serious security challenges and risks emanating from the East and South of Russia were the completely or partially unresolved territorial problems with some of Russia’s neighbours, the expansion of drug trafficking, and the illegal transfer of arms across its territory, the massive smuggling of goods from a number of neighbouring countries, and the growth of illegal immigration to Russian Far East and Siberia”<sup>119</sup>. It has always feared that destabilisation effects of the conflicts raging in Southern Caucasus would spill into neighbouring Northern Caucasus, its ethnically most diverse and politically unruly region. Russians have been greatly disturbed about the negative fallouts of spread of Islamic fundamentalism in its Southern periphery, because Russia has almost 20 million Muslims. The partially resolved struggle in Tajikistan, resurgence of Islamic identity, especially of the Wahhabi brand, the Taliban factor and the spread of Islamic extremism in other states to its South, have been a cause of worry for Russia. Therefore, it considers the external borders of the CIS as its own external boundary where all threats to national security must be met and neutralised. This principle has guided Russia in forging its relationships with the Central Asian states.

Russia has been able to establish the main dimension of its post-Soviet policy in the Central Asian region beginning with Primakov’s domination of foreign policy. The pursuit of multi polarity, non-adversarial relations with all states of the region and enhanced security cooperation are some of the main features of this policy. “Russia has formulated two goals as its major priorities – closer economic cooperation and stronger security ties with these countries.”<sup>120</sup> Russia aims at checking the advance of USA in the region, and maintain its own economic, political and security domination. It considers Central Asia as of vital importance, as a market for its industry as also from the security point of view.

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<sup>118</sup> Sezer, Duygu Bazoglu, “Russia and South West Asia: A View from the Region”, in Chufirin, Gennady, ed., n. 17, p. 210.

<sup>119</sup> Naumkin, Vitaly V., n. 61, p. 88.

### *The Atlanticist Phase*

Immediately after disintegration of Soviet Union, Russia followed a look West policy, leaving Central Asia to fend for itself, at a stage when the region most desperately needed assistance from Russia. Russia's initial preoccupation after the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1991 was on economic reconstruction, giving pre-eminence to its relations with Europe and coming to terms with the loss of its superpower status. It was also relieved that it no longer had to subsidise the economies of the Central Asian countries. This had been one of the main reasons for Russia to take the initiative along with other Slav states to disintegrate the Soviet Union. "The 'Atlantists' perceived Central Asia as the 'Asian underbelly', which ostensibly Russia had to cut off in the interests of a faster entry into Europe."<sup>121</sup>

Owing to its persistent economic woes, Russia neither had been willing, nor was actually in a position to provide meaningful aid to the Central Asian states. Nor could it make sizeable investments in their economies. As a result, the regional states were forced to diversify their political and economic ties with the outside world. The vacuum created because of Russian withdrawal was slowly filled up by outside powers - the West, USA and the immediate neighbours. The geopolitical importance of these states and their abundant oil and gas reserves and other natural resources were enough reasons for USA and other industrialised countries to be attracted to them. The region looked forward to a constructive relationship with the West-dominated multilateral financial institutions like the World Bank, IMF (International Monetary Fund), EBRD (European Bank of Reconstruction and Development) and Asian Development Bank.

In spite of the above, Russia was keen to maintain its control in some form over the territory of erstwhile Soviet Union, and termed the region as 'near abroad' as distinct from foreign countries. There was some confusion in the minds of many Russians regarding their relationship with the near abroad. "It was psychologically difficult to think of these countries as independent from Russia. Thus to many Russians and non-Russians, the relationship among the 15 republics was more of domestic policy than foreign policy."<sup>122</sup>

Russia gradually lost its former pre-eminent position in Central Asia, with tragic consequences for Russian interests in the region. USA, Iran, Turkey, the Islamic world and China made forays into the region, consolidating their position, driving Russia into a corner.

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<sup>120</sup> Chufirin, Gennady, n. 79, p. 477.

<sup>121</sup> Syroezhkin, Konstantin, "The Policy of Russia in Central Asia: A Perspective from Kazakhstan", in Chufirin, Gennady, ed., n. 17, pp. 100-109, p. 102.

<sup>122</sup> Donaldson, Robert H. and Noguee, Joseph L., *The Foreign Policy of Russia*, London: M. E. Sharpe, 1998, pp. 322, p. 155.

Russia thus lost considerable ground economically and politically. Larger economic role being played by other outside powers worked towards an eventual marginalisation of Russia in the region.

### **Pragmatism Steps In**

As a result of the Atlanticist policies, Russia was soon reduced to the role of a junior partner to the West, endangering its national interests. This policy increasingly lost domestic support. In addition, there was a growing asymmetry between Russian and US interests on a number of major international issues, and the expected help from the West and USA did not materialise. These factors brought the 'romantic' period to a close by 1995. In addition, "new internal alliances and power-seekers came to dominate the scene in Russia and Central Asia during the period 1994 to 1996, after a re-distribution of property and formation of oligarchies and financial groups, which appeared to influence inter-state relations. The commercial interests of these large holders of property began to prevail over the will of political leaders of these states."<sup>123</sup>

Russian foreign policy was reformulated in 1993-94 with the aim of bringing Central Asia back into the fold. Moscow's main interests were in the maintenance of regional stability, preventing other regional powers from establishing hegemony, and to protect and expand its economic interests, protection of ethnic Russians living in Central Asia (so as to prevent their return to Russia if possible), and to prevent the spread of Islamic fundamentalism (from Afghanistan via Tajikistan).

The pro-Western orientation of Russian foreign policy was replaced by a more balanced orientation of Primakov, who replaced Kozyrev as foreign minister. Russia now started to give concrete shape to its Asia policy, by drawing up clear new goals and a new policy doctrine for Asia – special attention was paid to relations with the Central Asian states. It gave priority to building close relationship with these states. Russia formulated two goals as its major priorities – closer economic cooperation and stronger security ties, in dealing with Central Asia. Russia decided to act both on bilateral as well as multi-lateral levels to achieve this.

However, by this time the political, economic and security situation in the region had undergone fundamental changes. "The vacuum created by the initial lack of Russian interest was filled by active penetration by Turkey, USA, Iran and China."<sup>124</sup> The Central Asian states had by now formulated their own foreign policies. In addition, their resentment at being

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<sup>123</sup> Syroezhkin, Konstantin, n. 121, p., 104.

left to fend for themselves, the Russian neglect of the region, incapability of the Russian economy to enthuse inter state economic relations, and failure to arrest the decline in scope and volume of business and trade were the other major factors forcing the Central Asian states to steer a course almost independent of Russia. Efforts began to be made to regain lost ground in Central Asia, but it was too late, with the other stakeholders having firmly bedded in. By 1996, Russia had lost its pre-eminent position in the region, and the vacuum was filled by an increase in the influence of China, Iran, Turkey and USA on one hand, and attempts by the regional countries to create a 'common market of Central Asia'.

Russian loss of its dominant position in Central Asia, attempts of other countries to push it out of the region and a crisis-ridden economy and society went a long way towards undermining the authority of Russia in the region, encouraging the local elite to ignore Russia more and more. Economically, though Central Asia is becoming less dependent on Russia, it remains their main trade and economic partner, mainly because of its geographic location, their land locked status, northward orientation of transportation and CIS oriented industrial infrastructure.

The future is likely to see a reduced trade pattern with Russia, as the states adapt themselves to the world market, develop communication network connecting to the sea lanes, commence development of infrastructure as a result of financial and technological assistance from the West, and exploitation of hydrocarbon and other natural resources. In spite of the above, Russia will continue to play an important role in the economies of the states of the region, at least for some time to come, due to their land locked status. Russia's key advantage lies in the transportation and infrastructure links that make Central Asian countries dependent on it. In an effort to reintegrate the Central Asian economies, Russia has at times resorted to coercive tactics like shutting of the export of Kazakh and Turkmen oil and demanding a share in the new oil and gas projects in the region, with limited success in the case of Kazakhstan.

### *Security and Strategic Ties*

Russia considers the maintenance of close security cooperation with the Central Asian states as an important element of its own national security. The Central Asian exterior borders even today, at least symbolically continue to be guarded by Russian troops; therefore, their borders to the South with third countries for all practical purposes retain the status of a common Southern border of the CIS. These border guards are seen by Russia as not only

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<sup>124</sup> Chufirin, Gennady, n. 79, p. 477.

protecting the CIS Southern borders, but also protecting Russian domestic national interests. Central Asia faces threat from two main directions – Western and eastern. The main threat in the Western zone is from Afghanistan to Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, and parts of Kyrgystan; and from the Chinese in the eastern zone to Kyrgystan and Kazakhstan.

The National Security Concept announced in Jan 2000 accordingly guides the Russian policies towards Central Asia. “The national security concept envisaged by the Russian Federation constitutes a system of views on ensuring the security of the individual, society and the state from external and internal threats in all spheres of life.”<sup>125</sup> The essential elements of Russian National Security Concept are as follows:-

- Russia supports multilateralism in the world.
- Attempt to create a structure of international relations based on the domination of Western countries is not acceptable.
- Significance of military force in international relations remains considerable.
- Terrorism is an international problem.

“Threats to the national security of Russia include the current economic flux, inadequate organisation of state power and civic society, spread of crime to social relations, organised crime, and terrorism, aggravation of national situation and deterioration of international relations.”<sup>126</sup> Main threats in the international sphere are eastward expansion of NATO, appearance of foreign military bases in close proximity to Russian borders, weakening of the integration process of CIS, and the appearance of conflicts close to the borders of Russia and the CIS. Russia recognised terrorism as a major threat, even before the September 11, 2001 incidents. One of the main strategic tasks of the Russian Federation will be to guarantee effective collaboration with the CIS member countries. Russia has also laid down the necessity to preserve nuclear weapons for national security; and the use of all available means including nuclear weapons to repel an armed aggression has been enunciated in the national security doctrine.

#### **Implementation of Foreign and Security Agenda**

“The vacuum left by Russian lack of interest in the initial stages was filled, on the one hand by the increased influence of China, Turkey, Iran and USA, while on the other

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<sup>125</sup> “National Security Concept of Russian Federation”, Strategic Digest, Indian Institute for Strategic Analysis, Jan 2000, p. 297.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, p. 299.

hand, by attempts to create a common market of Central Asia which in the words of Nazarbayev, covers 50 million people, has huge hydrocarbon resources, and had good prospects for rapid economic growth."<sup>127</sup> By 1999, all the Central Asian states except Tajikistan had joined the Central Asian Union, as a result of such efforts, in spite of their different levels of growth and differences over various issues.

The selection of routes that avoid Russia for export of hydrocarbon resources of the region, if made feasible will greatly reduce the political and economic influence of Russia there. The Central Asian states with vast resources of oil and gas will be a competitor of Russia for markets in Europe and elsewhere, and for investments into the oil and gas sectors by oil companies. For the Western companies, investment in Central Asia is a cheaper option than Russia, as far as oil companies are concerned. Russia is capable of exerting influence only in the pipeline projects. If the projects bypassing Russia are realised, Russia will drastically lose control over this geopolitically important region.

Relations between Russia and Central Asian states are characterised by the latter's ambivalence regarding the appropriate and desirable level of Russian presence and role. Strong Soviet era ties between them and the Russian elite connect the present Central Asian leaders. Russia prefers the region's current leaders to potential alternatives whether nationalistic, Islamists, or a mixture of both. The current leaders are more receptive to Russian interests and sensitivities. Many Central Asian leaders see Russia as a potential ally in their fight against their own domestic opposition and other disruptive forces coming from outside. The Russian role has been instrumental in the old Tajik nomenclatura's ability to come back to power. Some smaller Central Asian states, notably Kyrgystan, welcome some Russian presence to balance the power of large neighbours such as Uzbekistan and China and to discourage their hegemonistic ambitions. Turkmenistan sees Russia as a counter weight to larger neighbours such as Iran. The presence of Russian forces in Tajikistan is considered necessary by the Tajik government to counter Uzbek hegemonism.

However, none of the Central Asian countries wants a return to Russian rule and hegemony. Apprehensive of the Russian threat to their security, the Central Asian states have resorted to widening their relations with other countries and membership of international organisations. In this regard, Russia has had the most difficult relations with Uzbekistan, which is bidding for leadership of Central Asia. Though efforts at improvement of relations with Uzbekistan have been made by Russia, no great success has been achieved. With US

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<sup>127</sup> Syroezhkin, Konstantin, n. 121, p. 104.



troops on Uzbek soil, Russian problems have been further magnified. In fact, Uzbekistan is vying to play the role of regional power easing out Russian influence in the process. There has been a tendency on the part of some of the Central Asian states, actively aided by outside powers to squeeze Russia gradually out of the region. Uzbekistan and the USA have been accused of this.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgystan prefer to have close ties with Russia, as they consider China a potential source of danger, especially in the demography sphere. In addition, “the large Russian population in Kazakhstan and Kyrgystan has mainly made them strengthen ties with Russia.”<sup>128</sup> Russia and Kazakhstan started operating a common air defence system in May 1997, with Kyrgystan and Tajikistan joining later. Russia has continued to strengthen Kazakhstan’s military, and has delivered to Kazakhstan MiG- 29, Su 25 and Su 27 aircraft and other modern weaponry.

Russia started increasing coordination of security with the Central Asian states from early on. Tashkent Treaty on security was signed with Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in May 1992. This has formalised Russia’s military role in the region. All the countries, except Uzbekistan to a limited extent, are dependent on Russia to guarantee their security. Russia was compelled to become involved in the Tajik conflict in 1992 itself due to the security threat posed to Russia by Islamic fundamentalist forces. It also decided to regard the evolution of relations with CIS states as the major precondition for settlement of conflicts there. Russia also developed positive relations with international organisations – UNO and OSCE, as part of its new approach to the region. Peacekeeping operations have been considered important for de-escalation of conflicts. Thus, collective peacekeeping forces were created in Tajikistan with the participation of Uzbekistan, Kyrgystan and Kazakhstan. Russia has also enhanced coordination efforts by way of joint military doctrines, especially with Kazakhstan and Kyrgystan. Such increase in jointness can be attributed to Russia’s concerns at increased US military activity in the region. “The exercises of Central Asia Battalion (CentrasBat), a Kazakh-Uzbek joint battalion, in Kazakhstan in September 1997, also involved the US Army’s 82 Airborne Division, and was organised not by Partnership for Peace programme but by the US Central Command.”<sup>129</sup> Russia has also concluded that it cannot get into a confrontational mode with Kazakhstan. The path to Russian influence in the

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<sup>128</sup> Efeğil, Ertan, and Stone, Leonard A., “Iran’s Interest in Central Asia: A contemporary Assessment”, *Central Asian Survey*, 2001, 20(3), pp. 353-365, p. 355.

<sup>129</sup> Zviagelskaya, Irina D, n. 17, p. 135.

region passes through a cooperative effort between Russia and the Central Asian states. "The re-establishment and consolidation of Russian presence in the region and an end to tendencies unfavourable to Russia are possible if a coordinated policy of dynamic and flexible balancing within the framework of a real power balance in the region, taking into account Russia's much needed capabilities"<sup>130</sup> is implemented.

Russia clearly has important and vital stakes in the region; but the application of their policy has been uneven. With serious internal problems, and while trying to cope with and overcome its economic weaknesses, it is attempting to emerge in a strengthened manner from economic transformation. Until its own internal problems are resolved, it can hardly be a beneficial influence on the states of the region. "Russia realises the importance of economic relations with these states, but it is restrained by its inability to inject money into the region. It is trying to restore its hegemony over the region, and is actually competing for regional influence, yet its role continues to decrease and is constantly undermined."<sup>131</sup>

However, the Russian policy has lacked coherence. It functions on the achievement of short-term goals, though there has been a sincere effort at improving Russian position in the region in the long term, ever since Putin has come to power. "The following features of present day Russian political course in Central Asia can be singled out:

- An absence of ideas about the value of the region for Russia.
- An unwillingness to impose restrictions on itself for the sake of keeping Central Asia within the orbit of Russian influence.
- Rather superficial ideas about the socio-political and ethno-political process underway in the region".<sup>132</sup>

The new Russian foreign policy concept, laid down by President V Putin in Jun 2000, acknowledges Russia's limited capabilities and the need to make political concessions to the West. He has had to give further concessions to the West after September 11, 2001, though Russia would like the Central Asian States to limit their interaction with Western security organisations, particularly NATO, and to re-emphasise the CIS. September 11, 2001 has initiated a new world order where, as per Putin, 'Russian interests lay in cooperation and not in confrontation'. The US entry cannot be considered solely because of September 11, 2001;

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<sup>130</sup>Syroczhkin, Konstantin, n. 121, p. 109.

<sup>131</sup> Jones, Scott A., n. 1, p. 15.

<sup>132</sup> Zviagelskaya, Irina D, n. 17, p. 130.

but this tendency had started much earlier, with Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan and Uzbekistan stepping up their cooperation with NATO countries in the framework of Peace for Prosperity programme in 1997. Joint air exercises with the USA were conducted in 1997 and 1998 in the region. “Although the USA officially endorses an enhanced Russian role in cooperative approaches to regional security, these statements seem largely pro forma, with Russia relegated to a subordinate strategic position. NATO expansion, although it affects Russian security interests, lends direct support to this conclusion.”<sup>133</sup>

American entry into the region has not been to the liking of Russia, but has been accorded approval for two main reasons: one, Russia expects Western aid to flow, as its economy is still not strong enough, and two, it had little choice as the Central Asian states concerned were planning to go ahead with it, in any case. It was incapable of stopping entry of US troops in the region due to its own economic and political weaknesses. Though Russia has welcomed the entry of US troops in the region in its fight against terrorism, Russia has declared multi-polarity as an essential component of its foreign and national security policies. It has developed close relations with China as part of its multi-polarity policy. Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan and Tajikistan have signed agreements on confidence building measures in the military field in border areas and mutual reduction of Armed Forces along the borders.

### *Future Prospects*

Even after 12 years of separation, Russia has not yet fully realised geopolitical and geo-economic role in the region as a key player. The current Central Asian leadership has been trained under Moscow’s influence, and the close personal contacts at the top level have been major factors going towards ensuring a better integration process between Central Asia and Russia. However, once this generation of leadership is replaced by home-grown younger generation, fed on nationalistic feelings of an independent state, the relations between the two may be redefined. At that stage, Russia could be in the reckoning if it builds relationship with the Central Asian states based on equality and solid new foundations. It is in this context that Russia’s re-emergence, as a regional power will be defined; “whether it is able to manage to realise its Eurasian status and to enter the global community as an effectively operational, useful bridge – political, economic, and cultural – between Western and Eastern Eurasia.”<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Pollack, Jonathan B., “The Evolving Security Environment in Asia: The Impact on Russia”, in Gennady Chufirin ed., n. 17, p. 448.

<sup>134</sup> Syroezhkin, Konstantin, n. 121, p. 106.

There are certain common threats that bring both Russia and the regional states together. An expanding Islamic arc tending towards extremism and simultaneous development of narcotics traffic through Eurasia are the most potent threats that confront them. The Chinese threat is also looming large in the not so distant future. It is in Russia's interest to ensure that the threat of Islamic fundamentalism is not allowed to smother the region. "As to the Chinese threat, the following circumstances must be kept in mind: at the beginning of the new millennium, the planned economic growth in China and other Asian countries will change the pattern of global consumption of oil, natural gas and other principal natural resources. This will increase the significance of Central Asian and Russian deposits of natural resources. The needs of Asia will stimulate the formulation of new trade relations, transport schemes, and pipeline construction, which will require the strengthening of China's position in the Central Asian region. This will undoubtedly place significant economic and demographic pressure on Central Asia and Russian Far East. In both senses, Russia will have to adapt to China, which is looking to take its place in the comity of leading world powers. If a deep internal crisis prevents China from becoming a global power, its impact will be felt even more strongly, since a weakened Russia will have to resist unrest and chaos passing from a destabilised China not only into Russia but also into Central Asia."<sup>135</sup> Therefore, Russia will have to exert its influence and emerge stronger from its internal economic and political crises. The Russian elite recognise the threats posed to Russian geopolitical interests in the region, and are making efforts to ensure that their influence does not wane further.

Russia and Iran have followed a policy of cooperation and collaboration in Central Asia, accommodating each other's views. Russia sees Iran, which has been isolated from the international community by US 'dual containment' policy, as a primary partner and ally in Central Asia in maintaining stability, containment of Islamic fundamentalism, and in checking Turkish influence in Central Asia.

For the first time since the end of the cold war, USA and Russia have had common vital security interests. Russia has genuine interests in keeping the Islamist threat at bay, and is therefore a natural partner of USA and Central Asia in the fight against Islamic terrorism; however, the very same threat is the main justification for its influence in the region. Russia has the capability to provide arms, train personnel, and provide planning back up in terms of a trained staff to the Central Asian states; but it has neither the resources nor the will to perform the role of policeman for the region.

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid, p. 107-108.

Therefore, Russia has finally realised that it needs US support to maintain its influence in Central Asia, against the expected Chinese advance and Islamic extremism. However, geography cannot be altered and Russia will continue to maintain a strong presence in the region. US public designation of Central Asia and Southern Caucasus in the summer of 1997 as areas of its vital interests, and the entry of US military forces in the region as a result of its War on Terrorism have been viewed by Russia as diminishing its influence in the region. Though it has agreed to participate in this war, and has welcomed the entry of US troops in the region, it is highly suspicious of any long-term stay of US forces in the region, which would undoubtedly be inimical to Russian interests in the region.

### USA

US and other Western countries are increasingly turning their attention towards Central Asia as a region of strategic significance, because of its wealth of natural resources, including oil, gas, gold and uranium; its capability to serve as a conduit to drugs and arms smuggling; and its likelihood of becoming a battleground of competing cultures and ideas. "The US interests in Central Asia revolve around four basic concepts: strengthening regional economic mechanisms, developing East-West energy and transportation processes, non-proliferation, and providing support to conflict resolution efforts. Although there are geostrategic reasons for further involvement, American engagement is focused primarily on economic goals."<sup>136</sup>

The threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism to US interests worldwide is a new dimension that has compounded the situation in the region. USA wants to reduce its dependence on Saudi oil in times to come, by relying more heavily on Caspian Sea oil, because of its discomfort with Saudi export of conservative Wahhabi Islam and that the Gulf oil resources are likely to commence drying up in another thirty years time. Therefore, there is a need to develop alternate sources of supply in the meantime. Central Asia is landlocked, and therefore routes are necessary to expand Western trade operations to that area and for the domination of the region. Pre-September 11, there was a twin threat to Central Asia – Islamic fundamentalism from the South and national chauvinism from the North. The long duration of anti terrorist war being currently waged by USA, is in the interest of both USA and Russia, despite overall strengthening of the region.

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<sup>136</sup> Jones, Scott A., n. 1, p., 18.

In the first few years after the break up of USSR, USA had not evinced keen interest in the region, as it perceived it to be too unstable and volatile for commitment to the region's economic development, Islamic extremism was still to take roots and prospects for oil and gas in Central Asia were still not clear. In the initial period after the break up of the Soviet Union, USA looked to Russia for providing guidance to the newly created states in the former Soviet space to be able to formulate more stable and democratic futures. It also desired Russia to play the role of local policeman, if necessary, thus leaving the region to be an area of influence of Russia. The US was intent on preservation of stability in Central Asia and the prevention of the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. To that end, it was content to accept Russia's assertion of its special interests in the region. USA was mainly concerned with the possibility of nuclear proliferation from the erstwhile nuclear republics, which problem was resolved after Kazakhstan and Ukraine transferred their nuclear arsenals to Russia.

The discovery of substantial oil and gas reserves in the region caused a reassessment of the US attitude. A clear shift in US policy was evident by 1995, by which time the Western analysis of oil and gas resources of the Caspian Sea and Central Asian region had been accomplished, showing large amount of reserves in the region, indicating Western strategic interests there. At the same time, realisation came to the Western world that negative developments within Russia and Russian incapability to manage the chaos in the region was complicating matters, making situation conducive for the entry of extremist Islam, resulting in a policy shift. US policy makers helped these states to free themselves from dependence on Russia, and to "develop alternate security arrangements to complement the Russia dominated CIS military agreements and concentrate on developing ties with the global economy."<sup>137</sup> "By 1997, US strategy in Central Asia was no longer content to stay clear of Russia's self-declared zone of influence in its near abroad."<sup>138</sup> USA decided to take steps on its own to safeguard its national interests in Central Asia, which by then had become formidable. Over a period of time, US policy makers learnt to deal with the nomenclatura-turned-nationalist leadership in Central Asia. Slowly, the hype over democratic reforms was downgraded and shifted to the background, accepting the premise that by tradition and temperament the Central Asian people are little suited to democracy. By mid 1990s, USA was obsessed with the idea of pipeline route from Central Asia and Caspian Sea to Ceyhan (Turkey). Talbot,

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<sup>137</sup> Olcott, Martha Brill, "Central Asia, Russia and the West", in Chufirin, Gennady, ed., n. 17, pp. 137-155, p. 139.

<sup>138</sup> Ehteshami, Anoushiravan, "Geopolitics Beckons: Hydrocarbons and Politics of the Persian Gulf" in Mohammadi, Ali and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, ed., *Iran and Eurasia*, Lebanon, Ithaca Press, Published by Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing Limited, 2000, pp. 93-110, p. 98.

former US Deputy Secretary of State said in Jul 1997, 'The consolidation of free societies stretching from the Black Sea to the Pamirs will open up a valuable trade and transport corridor between East Asia and Eurasia.'

In addition to the lucrative oil and gas finds in the region, West sees Central Asia at the centre of all land based trade and commerce corridors connecting major business centres of the world. For long-term economic cooperation between the East and West, the development and domination of the three possible routes of transportation - the Northern Siberian Route, the Silk Route which can also be termed as the central route, and the Southern Route from Malaysia to Singapore to Bangladesh and India to Central Asia through Pakistan or Tibet - are considered as vital by the West for free flow of goods.

US national interests in Central Asia would dictate that the radical anti-West form of political Islam is not allowed to develop there, not allow Russia to re-emerge as a centre of power, civil war conditions not allowed to develop, and USA is able to play effective role in economic development of the region, including exploitation of its natural resources potential. US policies have always been guided primarily by economic considerations, as is evident from its dealings with the Taliban, and declaring it as its most hated enemy later on. 'It was Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, together with US oil interests behind the UNOCAL-Delta pipeline project (often held to be backed by CIA, wrongly or rightly) which were jointly held responsible for coordinating, providing logistics and financing the series of Taliban successes'<sup>139</sup>, in the capture of most parts of Afghanistan. Despite being well aware of the barbaric, extremist views of Taliban, USA had tolerated the regime and was ready to deal with it in the hope of constructing a pipeline through Afghanistan and Pakistan for export of Central Asian oil to the warm waters of the Arabian Sea, thinking that Pakistan would be able to exercise a sobering influence on Taliban. However, the Taliban had its own agenda of exporting Islamic fundamentalist revolution through jihad. The situation changed dramatically after September 11, 2001, heralding an era of deep US involvement in the region.

September 11, 2001 has brought in a new stage in international relations, when a small group of terrorists attacked the only global power in its own territory. US mainland was attacked for the first timer in 1812, and this is the second such incident. With this attack, terrorism has been globalised. The new world order is a world of increasing grievances, with globalisation of technology, ideas, finances, terrorism etc. USA had declared three objectives

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<sup>139</sup> Hyman, Anthony, n. 73, p. 115-116.

of their War against Terror: one, dislodging the Taliban regime from power in Afghanistan and destruction of Al Qaeda network; two, arrest of Osama bin Laden, Mulla Omar and other perpetrators of terror; and three, mobilising the world in its favour against global terrorism. It has succeeded in achieving the first, has failed miserably in the second, the Al Qaeda network alive and kicking with no trace of either Osama or Mulla Omar, and has achieved partial success in the third.

However, with the main objective of destruction of Al Qaeda network still illusive, USA has shifted its focus on its actual agenda of domination of world oil resources, including those of Central Asia. Its interest in the pipeline from Turkmenistan to the Arabian Sea through Afghanistan and Pakistan has again come into focus after the Taliban lost control of Afghanistan. USA tried to put King Zahir Shah in power in Afghanistan after the collapse of Taliban, for it found him amenable to US economic interests in the region. Even Hamid Karzai government has no objection to a pipeline through Afghanistan, provided there is a semblance of stability and governmental control in the outlying areas. An agreement has been signed in end 2002 between Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and US firm UNOCAL for commencing work on the pipeline project. However, Afghanistan is unlikely to be ready for pipeline projects for the next few years, as a result of lack of control of the Kabul government in the outlying areas.

USA has obtained basing rights in Central Asia, as a sequel to September 11, 2001 incidents. It is in the process of constructing a base in Kyrgystan, close to the capital of Bishkek that will house more than 3000 American personnel. A similar strength is already deployed in Uzbekistan. The scale of construction going on near Bishkek and the geopolitical and economic stakes of USA in the region, are clear indicators of a long stay by US forces in the region. These facilities have provided USA control over the oil and gas reserves of the region, while keeping an eye on the other regional players such as China, Iran and Russia. In addition to reducing Russian influence in the region, it will also result in halting advances being made by the Chinese there, a long-term goal of USA.

Once well entrenched, USA would not like to leave from there. Therefore, it will, ensure that the situation in the region is such as to demand US presence there for the security of the regimes. Moreover, it will ensure that the local regimes are not inimical to its interests and prolonged stay. This will demand dabbling in the internal affairs of these regimes, as also keeping the regimes weak and dependent on USA for support, as has been the case else where in the world, where US has had a presence. It will also allow the regimes to become more autocratic, with democracy being the first casualty. This is more so because USA finds



dealing with dictatorial regimes more comfortable than with third world democracies, whose governments are accountable to the public. USA has a long track record of supporting corrupt and tyrannical dictatorial regimes like South Korea's Syngman Rhee, Philippines' Ferdinand Marcos, Nicaragua's Anastaso Somoza, the Shah of Iran and the ruling regimes in Saudi Arabia and some other Gulf states, not forgetting the nearer home dictators in Pakistan. USA has followed a policy of developing excellent military-to-military relationship in its client states, as it is the most organised sector in these states. US presence in the region, therefore, is likely to result in more bloodshed, suppression of popular will, and instability.

It seems that USA is pursuing its short-term strategic interests at the cost of democracy, political and economic reforms and basic human rights. Although the US stated policy in the region is to support those governments that pursue democratic and market reforms, the ground realities are different. Kyrgystan, that has shown maximum movement towards democratisation and economic reforms, has gained hardly any benefits from the US; whereas, Uzbekistan, that has made minimal movement in these directions has had immense benefits from US policies. "The defence establishment in the US, which promulgated the view that Uzbekistan had a prominent role to play as an anti-Iranian and anti-Russian buffer, dictates the US policy in the region."<sup>140</sup> USA has considered Uzbekistan as an 'island of stability' and an 'anchor state' in the region, mainly because of its enormous population and a secular pro-West image, as compared to other states of the region. It is seen as a counterweight to Iran in the region, and a regional power. Much before the September 11, 2001 incidents, USA had started cultivating close relationship with Uzbekistan. "There is a general impression that Uzbekistan has been chosen by USA to be used to counteract Islamism, which is increasingly perceived as a grave threat to US interests. USA equally sees in Uzbekistan a suitable ally to counterbalance Russian influence in Central Asia and Moscow's imperial ambitions, in whose existence the West still believes."<sup>141</sup> Uzbekistan has the best air bases, transport facilities and military capability in Central Asia, and has entered into a strategic partnership with USA, providing it with facilities to station aircraft and troops on its soil for the war on terrorism. In return, USA has agreed to provide economic largesse to meet Uzbek security and economic needs; giving it \$25 million in September 2001 for military purchases, and \$ 100 million in Jan 2002 as part of its \$4 billion fund, provided by US Congress for fighting terrorism.

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<sup>140</sup> Anderson, Liam and Michael Beck, "US Political Activism in Central Asia", in Bertsch, et. al., ed., n. 1, pp. 75-89, p. 85.

<sup>141</sup> Naumkin, Vitaly V., n. 61, p. 84.

However, obtaining and propping up such dictatorial allies in the region, who use repression as a major tool to stay in power, is likely to exacerbate the situation further. Despite Uzbekistan's unwillingness to adopt political and economic reforms, USA has provided immense humanitarian aid, technical assistance, and investment support. A joint commission on economic cooperation has been set up, strengthening bilateral economic relations and for encouraging Uzbekistan's integration into international economic structures.

"It provided Most Favoured Nation status to Uzbekistan in Jan 1994, and the US government has provided support for US companies seeking to invest in Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan has been a major beneficiary of various sources of Western foreign aid."<sup>142</sup> In addition, Japan has invested in infrastructural development, while the European Union has downplayed Uzbekistan's poor human rights record, calling for a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and Uzbekistan. "By providing political and economic support to President Karimov, USA has sought to sustain an island of stability in a strategically important and highly volatile region. A stable pro-West Uzbekistan would, in turn, provide a crucial frontline of defence against the spread of Islamic fundamentalism and the threat of revived Russian expansionism."<sup>143</sup>

This is a short-term strategy, it has encouraged Karimov to continue with his repressive policies. Karimov has been particularly harsh in recent treatment of his opponents. "There is a broad consensus among observers that the Islamic threat in Uzbekistan has been deliberately exaggerated by Karimov for political purposes, and that, ironically, the real danger is that Karimov's repressive policies may help to create a threat where none had previously existed."<sup>144</sup>

The region has authoritarian regimes, which are repressive and corrupt. If the US is seen as supporting such despotic regimes, more and more Central Asians will adopt anti-US posture. Also, if the economic benefits of transforming the economy as per the dictates of Western financial institutions are not passed on to the populace, severe social, economic and political difficulties are expected. Resentment against US will also grow, as it will be perceived to be siding with a failed state system, like what had happened in Iran under the Shah. Conversely, if USA does not cooperate with the ruling elite in Central Asia, the latter could use fundamentalist forces against USA. Wherever USA has established bases, conflict has persisted there. Presently, there is peace to some extent. For how long?

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid, p. 85-86.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, p. 87.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, p. 88.

In the final reckoning, it seems that USA wanted to make an entry into the region, militarily, politically and economically for reasons not merely connected with the Caspian oil. The main reason seems to be the domination of the 'Eurasian heartland', keeping a check on China, Russia, Iran and Muslim fundamentalist forces that are active in the region encompassing Central Asia, Middle East and South Asia. USA considers Iran, China and Russia as potential threats to its plans in the region, and therefore wants to restrict and diminish their domination and influence in Central Asia. US interests are bound to come in conflict with those of the other three, leading to serious major power rivalry in the region in the coming years. USA at present is in a dominant position, and President Bush seems to be in an aggressive mood. He wants Iran to come to terms with USA at the latter's terms, and does not want to negotiate. He has bracketed Iran in the group of evil states along with North Korea and Iraq, and threatened it against amassing weapons of mass destruction and extending support to terrorist organisations in West Asia. USA has virtually encircled Iran with its troops in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgystan, Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. Teheran continues to face sanctions imposed by USA in the initial period of Khomeini rule. However, these sanctions are also causing immense loss to the multi-national oil companies, who find Iranian route as the cheapest and easiest one for export of oil and gas from Central Asia, and they have been applying pressure on US administration for lifting of sanctions against Iran. This may result in a change of US policy towards Iran in the near future, as the US economy is currently facing a slowdown, trying to avoid recession from getting worse. USA aims to get oil supplies from the Caspian Sea at a low price, whereas all the projected pipelines through Turkey would prove to be costly in terms of infrastructure, its continued maintenance and security. Iran is also desperately in need of improving relations with USA, as its economy is being harmed by sanctions. Secret parleys have been reported between the two after the ouster of Saddam from Iraq.

USA cannot replace Russia in the region, due to the latter's historical, economic, infrastructural and geographical proximity to Central Asia. It is obvious to USA that it cannot exclude Russia from the region; therefore, it wants to register its presence in the region as one of the regional powers. To that extent, it is working in collaboration and collusion with Russia in its fight against terrorism, and has taken care to synthesise its policies with Russian sensitivities. In addition, it had to rope in China in its fight against international terrorism, making it an ally as against an earlier assessment of a competitor.

USA has shown that it has the will and capacity to turn to military action, if the need arises. However, the reluctance of USA and Western powers to commit themselves to the use

of force is a factor worth considering. If the situation so deteriorates in Central Asia that the US is either forced to militarily either commit itself there, or withdraw leaving all its strategic and economic assets behind, it is difficult to say what decision USA may take. If taking military action in the Central Asian region is paramount for the defence of US national territory and domination of natural resources of the region, it is expected to get into the act. However, if it is perceived to achieve only local gains not related to US national territorial defence, USA might quit from the region leaving its assets behind. "Despite the current US public posture, should it be an all-or-nothing choice between military intervention and writing off debts and investments, the argument against military intervention is almost certain to prevail over the impulse to protect Western interests."<sup>145</sup> As far as investments are concerned, the commitment of US resources for extraction and export of oil and gas from the region is also likely to take place, if it comes at a reasonable cost. "While Western policy makers may talk about this region as one of new and real strategic importance, they still see it as little more than a back-up for the potentially much vaster oil reserves in the more strategically located Persian Gulf region. In an energy hungry world, the Caspian reserves are certainly worth trying to 'snare', but the West will only help develop them if it can do so at reasonable cost."<sup>146</sup>

By acquiring basing rights for its forces in Central Asia, USA has effectively checkmated its potential rivals in the region and the world – China, Russia, Iran and Islamic extremist forces. While USA perceives Russia to retain a regional power status, it sees China as an expansionist power it would need to contend with in the years ahead. US forces in Central Asia, Japan, the Korean peninsula, the Philippines, Taiwan, Pakistan, Middle East and Afghanistan are a ring thrown around China restricting its expansionist tendencies; eastward expansion of NATO added to the above deployments squeeze Russia; while its forces in the Muslim dominated Middle-East and Central Asia effectively encircling Iran.

NATO has officially proclaimed Central Asia as important for Euro Atlantic security and stability. Enlargement of NATO has remained a ticklish issue between USA and Russia. "Russia hopes that its participation in the anti terrorist alliance will secure a more decisive role for Russia in its relations with NATO, particularly if the alliance makes anti terrorist campaign as one of its core missions."<sup>147</sup> Russia is not averse to joining the alliance and would regard enlargement more favourably if the alliance were able to transform itself into

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<sup>145</sup> Olcott, Martha Brill, n. 137, p. 153.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, p. 153.

more of a political than a military organisation. NATO has been further enlarged in 2002, with the admission of nine new members including the three Baltic States, which is likely to cause problems to Putin at home. Perhaps, Russia will have a closer and formal association with NATO, as a part of the latter's long-term process. Russia needs US assistance in the form of foreign direct investment to give a spurt to its economy, which has started to look up of late.

“During the post 1990s period, the three key players in the geopolitical space around Central Asia – Russia, China and USA – achieved a provisional equilibrium. Russia maintained its traditional domination in its former provinces. China, as it developed its relations with Central Asian states, gradually increased its own political influence, while seeking to avoid confrontation with Moscow. The US, despite its preoccupation with other areas of greater strategic significance, kept a wary eye on the region.”<sup>148</sup> “September 11, 2001 made Central Asia the epicentre of geopolitical blocks on a global scale, and redefined the geopolitical situation surrounding Central Asia. The alignment of power has changed: US is now the region's main economic donor and security manager.”<sup>149</sup> Colin Powel, US secretary of State, stated in Dec 2001 during a visit to Tashkent that ‘US interests in Central Asia far exceed the conflict in Afghanistan’, which signified US long term strategic designs in Eurasia, including control over its energy resources.

“Even before September 11, 2001, a significant realignment of forces and policy was underway in Central Asia. In Russia, once Putin came to power, the Kremlin refocused its Central Asian policy from economic ties to military cooperation. China, for its part, significantly enhanced its presence in the region, above all through the SCO.”<sup>150</sup> Pre-September 11, 2001, USA had left the region to Russia, and had decided to avoid exerting any control over the region, due to the high costs involved. However, it was not possible to ignore the competition between China and Russia in the region. “It was clear that in the foreseeable future, China would eventually gain ascendancy and force Russia into a subsidiary position. Although the US, in the short term preferred the role of bystander, it ultimately faced the question of challenging – or accepting – the prospect of Chinese hegemony.”<sup>151</sup> September 11, 2001, forced USA to relocate Central Asia to be the focal point

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<sup>147</sup> Oksana Antonenko, “Putin's Gamble”, *Survival*, Vol. 43, Mo. 4, Winter 2001-02, pp. 50-61, p. 55.

<sup>148</sup> Rumer, Boris, n.59, p. 57.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid*, p. 57.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid*, p. 63.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*, p. 63.

of its strategic interests, fundamentally altering the balance of power in the region and among the three Great Powers – Russia, China and USA. The system of counterweights and balances created by Russia and China as part of SCO was now demolished with US military bases in Central Asia. Powell said on 13 Feb 2002 to the Congressional Committee, ‘Neither have we neglected to consider other aspects of Afghanistan war – how do we achieve a more stable Central Asia, we know that we cannot do it without Russia. Increasingly, Russia realizes that it cannot be done without us, without full participation with the countries of the region.’

### Afghanistan

Afghanistan is the single most important factor responsible for the current spell of instability in Central Asia. It has had historical, linguistic, ethnic and religious relations with Central Asia. Both have been part of the same cultures, be it the Buddhist or now the Islamic culture. Their ethnic, social, cultural and political ties go back centuries, and cannot be obliterated easily. The borders have largely remained porous, with both sides sheltering opponents of the others’ regimes in their territories. The Khans of Bukhara and Khiva and the Basmachis took shelter in 1920s in Afghanistan, while Afghans took shelter in the Central Asian states after the 1979 coup in Afghanistan.

In fact, the New Great Game could be said to have originated in Afghanistan, where it had ended in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was here that the US had armed the Mujahideen groups to fight the Soviet forces in the 1980s and later. With Afghanistan having been ruined by the never-ending civil war, the game has shifted to Central Asia, because of the oil finds there, located as it is on the junction of major trade routes and on the meeting point of major powers. Though the Taliban and Al Qaeda have been removed from power, their remnants do remain there in large numbers, especially along its borders with Pakistan. Warlords rule a major part of outlying Afghanistan, with the state having been totally devastated. It is the main producer of drugs and the warlords use the drug production machinery to survive and maintain their hold over their respective areas.

The US led forces generally avoid venturing into the rural areas to establish rule of law there, leaving the outlying areas to the local warlords. It seems that warlordism and lawlessness that were never wiped out of the state, may again surface in a manner more mortifying than anytime previously. No sincere effort at creating a nation state based on democratic principles and values has been made even after the removal of Taliban. Karzai

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has not even been able to appoint Governors of his choice in the provinces. The fractious nature of Afghan polity, where the Karzai government is divided on traditional ethnic/tribal/sectarian lines, warlordism, a destroyed and war torn economy, proliferation of arms in the society - in fact the Afghan society is fully armed, and callous attitude of outside powers have all combined to make recovery of Afghanistan an extremely difficult proposition.

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), a 4500 strong British led force, is located in Kabul to help the government in maintaining security and stability in Kabul. In addition, all the major ethnic groups in Afghanistan have their co-ethnics in neighbouring countries, which have been trying to exert influence over the country. Moreover, the current situation in Afghanistan has a profound effect on Central Asian region because of the same reason. Though the Taliban have been ousted from Afghanistan, their brand of Islamic rule has served as a role model for the aspiring Islamists of Central Asia. This new path of Islamic revolution seems attractive to an oppressed and disgruntled people of the region.

It is a historical fact that no outside power has been able to tame Afghanistan, and USA seems to be no exception. The US shift of focus to Iraq is a tacit approval of this historical truth. Therefore, it can be presumed that lawlessness and anarchy is likely to prevail in Afghanistan for quite some time, which is going to affect the situation in Central Asia adversely. "It is a long haul in Afghanistan before a reasonable level of normalcy returns and efforts at reconstruction bear fruit. The international coalition, especially USA, is learning the hard way that it is one thing to bomb a country and conduct ground operations to oust an unacceptable regime. However, it is quite another thing to fight the force that created and sustained that regime."<sup>152</sup>

Other countries like China, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have tried to influence the regional states more through cultural, religious and economic means, than through military methods. Afghanistan has a history of waging unconventional wars for long durations, and the export of this kind of warfare threatens Central Asia. During the Taliban rule over Afghanistan, Tajikistan had reported a number of incursions from Afghanistan, which were ostensibly meant to supply weapons from Mujahideen to opposition groups inside Tajikistan.

In nutshell, it can be premised that inter ethnic peace in Afghanistan is nowhere in sight. Given an opportunity, it is likely to spill over into Central Asia. Their porous borders make movement of trained manpower easy. If the drug production machinery of the Afghan

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<sup>152</sup> Ved, Mahendra, "Afghanistan: The Unfinished Task", *World Focus*, Jan 2002, pp. 18-20, p.18.

warlords is destroyed or at least drastically cut, with no other means of livelihood, large number of Afghans may migrate to greener pastures of Central Asia. Such a population can easily be lured into smuggling and mafia operations. Lastly, Afghanistan is an excellent training ground for Islamic fundamentalist forces, to be let loose on its neighbourhood. Such a threat exists from the Wahhabi brand of Sunni Islam, promoted and actively aided by Pakistan in terms of training, indoctrination, manpower, facilities and finances.

### **Iran**

Immediately after the break up of Soviet Union, the Iranian clergy harboured ambitions of exporting its brand of Islamic revolution to the Central Asian region; however, the regional leadership and people were mostly anti-extremists, believing in secularism. Therefore, Iran's forays did not find favour in the region. The Iranian policy shifted slowly to one of pragmatism, with Rafsanjani taking over as President of Iran. It has followed a cautious policy towards Central Asia since, attempting to thwart US and Turkish forays into the region, by forging close relations with Russia. The rich hydrocarbon reserves in the Caspian Sea, and a deep US interest in the exploitation of these resources, coupled with a simultaneous reduction in Russian influence in the region, have made Caspian Sea as a strategic area for Iran. "Iran, since 1995, has been trying to project a moderate face; it has mended fences with the conservative Arab states, and its foreign policy in Middle East and the Gulf region is reaching a state of equilibrium."<sup>153</sup>

Iran's geostrategic position gives it substantial advantages over other potential competitors in Central Asia. Its 2000 km long frontier with Turkmenistan makes it easier for Iran to offer easy access to the sea. Iran's other assets include the historically strong influence of Iranian culture in the more settled areas of Central Asia and the ethnic and linguistic proximity of Tajiks to the Iranians. However, the same Iranian cultural influence is a major drawback, as it is seen as aligned to the Tajiks in an area that is predominantly Turkic, with the (Persian) Tajiks and Uzbeks – the predominant Turkic community in Central Asia, remaining at loggerheads. Other disadvantages are – its Shiite status, US opposition to current Iranian regime, perceived expansionist tendencies, and fundamentalist Islamic leadership. "The possible Iranian influence (extremely exaggerated by some Westerners) is quite limited. Firstly, Iranians who are Indo-Aryans are racially different from other ethnicities of the Southern region of the former Soviet Union, who are Turks or Caucasians

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<sup>153</sup> Efezil, Ertan and Leonard A. Stone, n. 128, p., 353.



by origin (excepting Tajiks and other minor groupings). Secondly, Iran belongs to the Shiite group of Islam, whereas the majority of the region belongs to the Sunni group. Thirdly, local elites cannot adopt Islamisation and the theocratic form of government already imposed in Iran. Fourthly, economically Iran is not in a position to initiate structural modernisation in the region.”<sup>154</sup> Active role played by Iran in attempts at exporting Islamic revolution in the Middle East in the early years of Khomeini regime, has made things difficult for Iran in Central Asia, in spite of its renunciation of the path of exporting revolution. Another major hindrance is US insistence on continuing sanctions against Iran, in spite of a downward trend in Iran’s antagonism towards USA.

“However, the oil cartels are insisting that Iran, which has the largest gas reserves in the world and has 93 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, be included in the future set up. Otherwise, they will have to spend billions of dollars to bring oil by the Baku-Ceyhan route.”<sup>155</sup> The Western control over financial resources and technology, the dire need for both of these by the Central Asian countries, along with Western control over all international financial institutions, have given a clear upper hand to US policies in Central Asia. USA has made all preparations for a long stay in the Persian Gulf-Caspian Sea region, not only because of Russian and Chinese forays in the region, but also because of Iran’s pre-eminent geostrategic position. “The fact that Iran straddles the two energy zones which the US covets, and also that its territory provides the shortest and most direct geographical link between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, adds to US dilemma about Iran.”<sup>156</sup>

The above factors, coupled with its geographical location and a comparatively weak military strength, Iran cannot be considered an influential power in the region, at par with Russia and China. Uzbekistan has adopted an antagonistic attitude towards Iran due to the need for Western assistance, perceived Iranian influence in its Persian culture dominated Tajik strongholds of Samarqand and Bukhara, and its ambition for regional power status. Uzbekistan, the only CIS state that agreed to join US sanctions regime against Iran, and openly accuses it of exporting extremism, considers Iran as a major threat. “In spite of Uzbek efforts aimed at distancing itself culturally from Iran, a large section of Iran’s intelligentsia argues that Uzbek culture both before and after the advent of Islam, has its roots in Iranian civilisation. Cultural aspects like the Simorgh (mythological bird) and Shir-o-Khorshid (the

<sup>154</sup> Kortunov, Andrei, and Sergei Louncev, “Russia – the Southern Flank and Challenges to Russian Security”, *World Affairs*, Jan-Mar 2001, Vol 5, No 1, pp. 83-99, p. 95.

<sup>155</sup> Mukerji, Apratim, “Northern Alliance in Afghanistan: US Policy”, *Himalayan & Central Asian Studies*, Vol. 1, No 1, Jan-Mar 2002, pp. 35-55, p. 52.

<sup>156</sup> Ehteshami, Anoushiravan, n. 138, p. 99.

lion and the Sun) which have recently been given importance and numerous applications in Tashkent are all pre-Islamic Iranian symbols.”<sup>157</sup>

Iran has cultural and demographic contiguity with Tajikistan, Tajiks being of Persian origin. Iran contributed initially to give Tajik civil war a ‘fundamentalist’ flavour, by involving itself in Tajik internal affairs, with the aim of bringing to power a pro-Iranian party. “Iran has since moderated its interference in Tajik affairs and lessened the promotion of ‘fundamentalism’, but so far it has not been able to repair the damage done to the Tajiks or to its own image.”<sup>158</sup> Of late, Iranian projection of a moderate path has encouraged the regional countries to expand cooperation with Teheran. This is yet to succeed due to Iran’s political and financial limitations and its rift with the West.

Fears of export of Islamic revolution by Iran have largely been unfounded due to several reasons. Iran has followed a pragmatic policy and concentrated on building economic and political links with all the Central Asian countries. A rail link has been established between Iran and Turkmenistan and Turkmen gas is being sent via a pipeline to Iran. Iran has commenced a number of joint projects and regional transport networks. Turkmen gas is being pumped to Europe through a 1500 KM pipeline that passes through Iran. It has opened the “Mashhad-Sarakhs railway line which completes the historic rail link dubbed the New Silk Route in 1996, allowing China and Central Asia access to the Persian Gulf and to the Mediterranean through Turkey.”<sup>159</sup>

The devastation caused by the Iran-Iraq War in its Southern and Western sectors, has shifted major developmental activities to Northeast Iran, a prominent shift in the Iranian economic and democratic gravity northwards, closer to Central Asia. Iran is also worried about the possibility of inter ethnic strife in Central Asia having an effect on its own Turkic speaking minorities, which include the Azeris and the Turkmen. Therefore, it would prefer a quieter and peaceful Central Asia, for all round development activities in its backward Northern region. Iran would prefer its Northern region to be linked economically with the Central Asian region. Moreover, Iran offers the shortest pipeline route for export of oil and gas from Central Asia through the Persian Gulf, which would bring immense economic benefits to Iran. Iran has also found support from Russia, which views it as a counterweight

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<sup>157</sup> Ertan, Efezil, n. 128, p. 357.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, p. 358.

<sup>159</sup> Ali, Lubna Abid, “Patterns of Continuity in Iran’s Foreign Policy” in Mohemmadi, Ali and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, ed., n. 139, pp. 81-92, p. 86.

to Turkish influence. Iran's efforts have been hampered due to its lack of financial resources and due to its political isolation because of the US policy of containment against it.

Iran has pursued its objectives in Central Asia through political, economic and diplomatic channels, downplaying the Islamic revolution card. It has developed close relations with Kazakhstan and has been most active in befriending its immediate neighbour, Turkmenistan, providing it access to the Persian Gulf. Its relations with Uzbekistan remain low key, mainly because Uzbekistan sees Iran as its regional rival. Iran has formulated its foreign policy with minimum gap between ideology and pragmatism. Its own economic reconstruction and developmental activities, along with the situation in Central Asia and Afghanistan and effects of US sanctions are its main foreign policy concerns. It desires peace and stability in the region for its own economic recovery.

Geographically, Iran is the central link between the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea. Iran's common ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious ties with Central Asia are a weakness, and a civil strife in Central Asia could easily cross into Iran. Therefore, it is in Iran's interest to maintain peace in Central Asia. Pakistan and Turkey are other serious competitors of Iran in the region. However, the discrediting of Pakistan as a result of its open support to Taliban and Wahhabi Islamic extremism in Afghanistan, and Turkey having no borders with Central Asia have made these two actors in the region less important than Iran, given Iranian projection of a moderate face in Central Asia.

### Turkey

"The disintegration of the Soviet Union was met with unanimous delight in Turkey by both politicians and the public, apparently not only from relief at the disappearance of the 'Soviet threat', but also as offering possibilities for the revival of the national ideal – the creation of 'Great Turan'."<sup>160</sup> Turkey started seeking a more active role in the newly formed geopolitical space. The Turkish speaking Central Asian states also followed a policy of rapprochement with Turkey. However, to its discomfiture, Turkey found that its ethnic and linguistic affinity with the Central Asian states was more distant than their expectations, as new regional dialects and ethnic loyalties had developed over the last century.

Turkey has been an important factor to reckon with in the region, not only because it was the seat of the Ottoman Empire, but also because of its economic progress, membership of NATO with the second largest forces in NATO, people of Turkey and most of Central

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<sup>160</sup> Nadein-Raovrky, Victor, "Russian-Turkish Relations", in Gennady Chufirin, n. 17, pp. 172-180, p. 174.

Asia being of Turkic origin and Muslims. Also, Turkey has been the launching pad for the US-British bombing raids on Iraq. Turkey has tried to compete with Russian influence in the region, post-Soviet Union. It has also provided support to Chechen separatists' fight against Russian forces, which Moscow has not forgotten.

There is ethnic Turk population in all but one (Tajikistan) of the Central Asian republics. Therefore, Turkey has always tried to maintain close ethnic and cultural ties with the region, which has been a cause of concern for other countries of the region. Turkey abolished the caliphate in 1924, and abandoned the pretensions of commanding the Muslims' political allegiance. However, "the abolition of the caliphate in Turkey did not overnight eliminate the Islamic traditions and cultural outlook of the Central Asians, acquired over centuries, or their habit of regarding Istanbul as their national Islamic centre, next only to Mecca and Medina."<sup>161</sup>

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey came on the scene immediately. Turkish leaders made it clear that they wanted to play an influential role in Central Asia. The conventional wisdom was that Turkey's role in the region would be able to provide an appropriate (secular) model for the new states. It wanted to act as a window to the international community. Ethnic and linguistic affinity, a well-developed industrial base, a vibrant private sector and the perception of being the West's partner made Turkey initially an attractive proposition for the Central Asian countries. Many Turkish politicians, academics and businesspersons travelled to Central Asia as part of an extensive political exchange. Its model of secular Islam was touted as the ideal to follow. Turkey gave generous loans, aid to the Central Asian countries, and funded the education of students and military personnel in Turkish institutions. Turkey also offered itself as an alternate route for the transportation of oil. However, "there was subsequent disillusionment in Central Asia, due to the inability on Turkey's part to provide educational and economic assistance. It was found that Soviet education system was far more advanced than the Turkish system."<sup>162</sup>

Turkey's influence did not grow as expected primarily for two reasons – Turkey's worsening economic and political problems coupled with greater experience of Central Asian countries in the conduct of their external relations, which have reduced Turkey's appeal as a model of development. Having recently shed the yoke of Soviet rule they were not amenable to Turkey's efforts to act as a big brother. Pan-Turkish sentiments are also likely to

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<sup>161</sup> Karpat, Kemal H., n. 4, p. 178.

antagonise Russia, China and Iran. Russia moved in quickly to counter the growing Turkish influence and views Iran as her ally in this quest. However, Turkey does retain some influence, though lack of geographical access and inability to provide financial and technical assistance are major limitations.

### **China**

Currently, two historic events are taking place in Eurasia simultaneously: the decline of the Russian power, and the continued rise of China with its economy and military in an improved trajectory pattern, to become a super power in a few years' time. China "wants to continue to amass political, economic and military power or the comprehensive national power, so that when the time of reckoning finally arrives, China is able to have its way even without firing a single shot."<sup>163</sup> The Chinese have a "shrewd and long term geopolitical design of extending Chinese influence and reach in the strategically important region of Southern Eurasia, comprising Central Asia, Transcaucasus and the former Northern tier countries of Pakistan, Iran and Turkey. It is through this region that important trade, transport, oil and gas pipeline routes are expected to pass, including the revived Silk Route, TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia)"<sup>164</sup>. By the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China with its 1.5 plus billion people will be thirsty for new territories and natural resources. Conceivably, "parts of Central Asia could satisfy some of China's hunger; much of Central Asia is low in population, large in terms of territory (around 51 million people in 1995 and an area of 3,994,300 square KM), and very rich in primary inputs. If, in the coming years, numbers continue to dictate China's foreign policy, then the chances of Beijing giving in to the temptation of usurping some of the 'virgin' territories of Central Asia cannot be ruled out."<sup>165</sup>

China faces two major threats that could emanate from the region: pan-Turkism and Islamic extremism. After the creation of the new Central Asian states, China realised that its national interest lay in the long-term stability of the region. In addition, China wants to improve its political and military influence in its Western periphery, which is part of its long-term goal of being part of the New Silk Route between Europe, Eurasia, and East and South Asia. Main emphasis of China in its relation with the Central Asian states has been to ensure

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<sup>162</sup> Jones, Scott A., n. 1, p., 17.

<sup>163</sup> Bakshi, J., "SCO: Before and After September 11", *Strategic Analysis*, Apr-Jun 2002, pp. 265-277, p. 270.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid*, p. 270.

<sup>165</sup> Ehteshami, Anoushiravan, n. 138, p. 108.

that instability does not cross over from Central Asia to its Xinjiang province bordering the region, with a Turkic Uigur Muslim population. "Xinjiang is strategically and economically important to China for several reasons: the region's natural resources and its connectivity to Central Asian landmass, Pakistan and Afghanistan."<sup>166</sup> China has also invested heavily in its under developed Northern and North Western regions in the last few years, to tap the vast energy resources of that region, and establish communications with Central Asia for exploitation of its energy resources, especially Kazakhstan. It has been following a two-pronged strategy towards its minority groups: quell ethnic separatism with a heavy hand, while at the same time, reward, recruit and co-opt members of minority groups who are able or ambitious. At the same time, China continues to promote the movement of Han Chinese into the minority regions to tilt the population ratio in favour of the Hans.

China is bordered by three Central Asian states - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It is worried about the spread of Islamic fundamentalism and possibility of ethnic unrest in the Xinjiang, which has a population of 15 million of whom 60% are Uigur Muslims. It holds vast natural resources necessary to fuel China's modernisation including the oil reserves in the Tarim basin and large deposits of natural gas, iron and coal. As far as the Central Asian states are concerned, they are worried by the threat posed by China. The Chinese have significant territorial claims on Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It also eyes the oil interests of the region. Moreover, a large number of Chinese entrepreneurs and shopkeepers (including illegal migrants) have set up shops and businesses in Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan. A large number of Kazakhs have also migrated from Xinjiang to Kazakhstan; this migration being facilitated by both sides: Chinese wanting to increase Han population in Xinjiang, while Kazakhstan wanting to increase its Kazakh population percentage.

Chinese policy in Central Asia aims to maintain political stability through economic development. It is looking at having an economic zone in the region, with North Western and Northern China as the infrastructural hub, supported by Central Asian energy resources, thus integrating the region economically with the rest of the country. It has been pursuing trade and investment opportunities with the Central Asian states, strengthening their fragile economies, firm in the belief that economic development in the region will stave off ethnic and religious conflicts. Thus, China has clearly been following economics-based approach to the region.

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<sup>166</sup> Boris Rumer, n. 59, p. 62.

No other country is more suited than China to play a decisive role in the economic development of the region and its political direction than China. It is currently maintaining a low profile in the region, concentrating in developing its economic rather than political relations. The Chinese have become a major trading partner with Kazakhstan and Kyrgystan, continuously developing its investment strategy. China is committed to long-term infrastructural projects within these countries and would like peace to remain for their completion.

Road and rail links to Kazakhstan have improved bilateral trade between the two. It has built rail links with Kazakhstan and has emerged as a significant trading partner. China is also exploring the feasibility of constructing a pipeline through its territory and onwards to Japan. Water is one likely source of friction between China and some of the states of the region. Any activity connected with the development of sources of water carried out by China in collaboration with Kyrgystan is bound to harm the interests of downstream Uzbekistan. Stability in Central Asia is essential to Chinese economic growth as the Central Asian countries could provide most of the oil and gas that China's industries are likely to require in the years ahead. It has also succeeded in alleviating the fears of the Central Asian countries, about its intentions, by signing an agreement on confidence building measures in April 1995

The Chinese have penetrated deep into the US market, and the US-China economic ties have gained enormity over the last few years; therefore, any policy shift intended to be brought about by the US in its relations with China is weighed in the light of its effect on their mutual economic relations. The Chinese, like the Russians emphasise 'world peace and development in a multi polar world'. Whereas USA is in a dilemma whether to call China as a strategic partner or a strategic competitor, China has ambitions to become a world power, and is keen to enhance its economic power to achieve this. The war on terror forced USA to declare China as a strategic partner, while China has joined the war for its own internal needs – to combat extremism in Xinjiang. The manner in which the war on terror is being fought and the evident long term stay of US forces in Central Asia along China's Western borders are sure to make China wary of increasing US influence in the region. In addition, any plans to alter the security dynamics in South and Central Asia are likely to be viewed by China with circumspection. China would also at the same time, not antagonise USA and European countries beyond a point as they are assisting China in its economic development.

Chinese goods have made major inroads in the region in the last few years. China is keen to have a New Silk Route through Central Asia from China to Europe. It views such a network of railways and highways as a transmission belt for the projection of Chinese wealth

and trade into Central Asia, and beyond to Middle East, Africa and Europe through the region. This East West link is most important from China's point of view. A route to Europe, an opening to the Persian Gulf through Iran, and onto Africa through the Middle East and Egypt would provide enormous strategic advantages for China.

China represents for the Central Asian states a successful example of economic transformation and growth, and provides a cheaper option for technical expertise and technical know-how. China's ties with the other Central Asian states are less developed than those with Kazakhstan. It has been attempting to make further inroads in the region through multi lateral organisations.

### **Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)**

This forum, which was initially known as 'The Shanghai-5', is a grouping that links China, Russia and three Central Asian states bordering China, namely, Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan and Tajikistan. China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan and Tajikistan formed the Shanghai – 5 in 1996 primarily to resolve border disputes, and to reduce Armed Forces along the borders. They signed the 'Agreement on Strengthening Military Cooperation in Border Areas' in Apr 1996 at Shanghai. They signed another agreement on 'Mutual Reduction of Military Forces in the Border Areas' in 1997, aimed at reducing the border forces to defensive levels, promoting transparency and mutual trust, making military activities along the borders predictable. The grouping also took note of common threats of drug trafficking, religious extremism, separation and illegal immigration, declaring its commitment to fight these forces. A decision to set up an anti terrorist centre at Bishkek was taken during 1999; and the next summit endorsed Russian and Chinese positions on a multi polar world.

Russian interest in the creation of this regional forum was to formalize its influence over the region and address its primary concern – Islamic extremism. The Central Asian states found it advantageous to have alliance with Russia and China, two members of the Security Council, in their fight against Islamists. The Chinese were keen to have stability in its North Western province of Xinjiang, and enlist cooperation of the Central Asian states in resolving its problems there, due to ethnic similarity between people sitting astride the border between Xinjiang province and the contiguous Central Asian states. This partnership with Russia will ensure stability in the Xinjiang region, until such time, as the province is not subsumed in mainstream Chinese nationalism. Therefore, at the present juncture, the SCO with a partnership with Russia is in China's national interests. China avoids rocking the boat, while not giving an impression to Russia about asymmetry of relations in favour of the



former. "China generally avoids blocks and alliances. Beijing chose to participate in the SCO confident in the knowledge of its own superiority. In joining the SCO, China had the following goals: most important, isolating Xinjiang from the turbulent Muslim environment; counteracting US influence in Central Asia; and, lastly, replacing Russia as the key actor in the region."<sup>167</sup> This grouping is assuming a growing role in the post-cold war global diplomacy. The very essence for the Shanghai Forum has been to put fwd an alternative paradigm for dealing with issues of regional and international cooperation and security.

Shanghai – 5 was renamed as SCO after Uzbekistan was admitted as a sixth member in Jun 2001. The organisation is not seen as very effective after September 11, 2001; however, attempts are being made to enthuse fresh life into it. Uzbekistan joined the organisation, after having withdrawn from CIS Security Treaty, indicating its desire to manoeuvre between China and Russia. A convention on combating terrorism, separatism and extremism was also signed in the same summit in Shanghai. Both India and Pakistan have expressed their desire to join the SCO. However, India "would prefer to be invited to join the organisation, and with due cognisance of India's legitimate interests rather than apply for it."<sup>168</sup>

Both Russia and China have been making efforts at increasing their influence in the region by security and economic tie-ups. Pre September 11, USA saw the formation of SCO as aimed at combating US hegemony and promoting multi polarity. The war on terrorism gave USA an excellent opportunity to entrench itself in Central Asia, declared as its area of 'special interest', where borders of major powers – Russia, China, India and Iran – meet. China has gained from the war on terrorism as combating international terrorism became No. 1 task of US policy instead of China being projected as the emerging strategic rival."<sup>169</sup> Post September 11, 2001, SCO held an extraordinary meeting in Jan 2002, to discuss regional security and cooperation. The joint statement at the end "emphasised the leading role of UNO in the struggle against international terrorism."<sup>170</sup> Uzbekistan has forged security ties with USA and offered it bases without consulting the SCO. However, Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan and Tajikistan have offered bases after suitable consultations with Russia and China, and Kyrgystan has coordinated the lease of its air base at Manas near Bishkek with SCO and CIS

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid, p. 63.

<sup>168</sup> Bakshi, J., n. 163, p. 268.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, p. 273.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid, p. 273-274.

members. The prolonged stay of US military forces in the region has aroused deep concerns in Russia and China. USA also is keen not to antagonise any of them.

### **Pakistan**

Pakistan has been keen to expand its influence to the Central Asian region, and shares common historical, cultural and religious ties. It is keen to improve bilateral relations with them, but has very little to offer to these states except for a fully armed and trained army of Islamic enthusiasts, which can only be a source of instability in the region; and a connectivity to the Indian Ocean. Pakistan would aim to acquire 'strategic depth' vis-à-vis India by establishing an Islamic bloc in conjunction with Afghanistan and the Central Asian states. It "has been seeking to lure the Central Asian republics by offering them road and rail outlets to the Arabian Sea ports across the Indus Basin corridor passing through the Karakoram Highway across Chinese Xinjiang province, linking up with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan."<sup>171</sup> Thus, Pakistan has opened the land route to Dushanbe, linking Fergana Valley with Pakistan, along the Karakoram Highway. A rail link with Chinese assistance is also, on the anvil.

Moreover, Pakistan has been selling the idea of availability of Karachi and Gwadar ports on the Indian Ocean, as outlets to Central Asian oil, gas and other goods. It is keen to revive the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan oil and gas pipeline route, for which agreement has recently been signed between the concerned parties. However, the disturbed internal situation in Afghanistan and hoards of freely moving armed miscreants in Pakistan are major obstacles to this enterprise. Moreover, financial viability of any pipeline to Pakistan is only possible when the huge Indian market is exploited, of which there is very little scope, given the level of relationship between India and Pakistan.

The madarasas along the Afghan-Pakistan border that are churning out large number of militant Islamic fighters from various Muslim countries from Bosnia to Chechnya to Central Asia to Xinjiang to South Asia to South East Asia, and to the Middle East and Africa, are a major source of irritation in the relations between Pakistan and the Central Asian states. They are a source of Islamic fundamentalist threat to the region. Even if the Pakistan government wants to put a stop to such activities, not that it has shown any inclination to do so, it is not in a position to do so, because its writ no more runs in its Northern tribal regions. All the

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid, p. 269.

neighbouring states, including Central Asian region and India are affected by this phenomenon.

Uzbekistan has been mainly responsible for Pak entry into the Central Asian region. Karimov realised the importance of Pakistan, as a 13 KM rail and road link along the Wakhan corridor in Afghanistan could connect Uzbekistan to Karachi port. This gave birth to the idea of an Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan rail project. Pakistan has been able to make major entry in the textile and jute industry in Uzbekistan, buying up more than 50 percent stakes in many factories there. It has also established joint ventures in the textile sector. "Pakistan considers Central Asian states as a diplomatic and commercial opportunity and as an expanded 'strategic depth', though there is little apparent enthusiasm in Central Asia for taking sides in South Asia. Despite the suspicions and doubts about the Central Asian states regarding Pak support for Taliban in Afghanistan, Pakistan is trying to forge good neighbourly relations with this region."<sup>172</sup> However, Pak links with terrorist organisations active in Central Asia, its support to IMU, Taliban and other militant outfits in the region, drug and narcotics smuggling with active involvement of Pak Army and ISI are major dampeners in improving Pakistan's relations with the Central Asian states. In spite of these problem areas, Pakistan has been pursuing aggressive diplomacy in the region.

### **India**

After the Second World War, China and USSR gained control over Central Asia. Politically Iran had withdrawn from the region in the 1920s. India did so during the period 1947-1960, when India lost the connectivity to Central Asia to Pakistan that was available through Jammu & Kashmir; and through Tibet as a result of Chinese occupation of Tibet. If these two linkages had remained within Indian control and/or influence, today India would have been one of the more important players in Central Asia. The immense loss of areas of such strategic importance will continue to haunt India and cause great damage to India's efforts at gaining the status of a regional power. Located at the cross roads of three civilisations, the Islamic, the Christian and the Buddhist, this region is highly vulnerable to internal instability. Close proximity of the region makes it an area of great significance to India, geopolitically, economically and strategically.

Initial Indian reaction to the creation of five Central Asian republics was that of a distant state. However, the realisation that Pakistan was actively trying to form a Muslim bloc

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<sup>172</sup> Roy, Meena Singh, "India-Kazakhstan: Emerging Ties", *Strategic Analysis*, Jan-Mar 2002, pp. 48-65, p. 49.

and it was attempting to create strategic depth vis-à-vis India as a result of this alignment, soon dawned on India. India immediately got into the act, providing support to the pragmatic and secular leaders of these states against encroachment by militant and conservative Islam. However, a weak Indian economy and severe budgetary constraints restricted India's ability to make an impact on the new republics. As it became evident by 1993 that Pak dreams of a Central Asian alliance had not materialised, India's concerns about the region declined. This sit back posture cannot suit India's long-term strategic objectives, especially after September 11, 2001, and with China making deep inroads in the region. Moreover, the US fight against terrorism and eradication of Islamic fundamentalism are of vital concern to India. Since the exit of the Taliban from Afghanistan, there has been a slight cosyng up of relations between Pakistan and Iran, resulting in an increase in political, economic, and strategic cooperation, as a result of growing US and Russian influence in Afghanistan. This is neither in the interest of India, nor that of Central Asian states as such strategic relations are likely to result in creating further bloodshed in the region. India's strategic interests and concerns are along its Northern and North Western borders, which are geographically contiguous to and in proximity of Central Asia. Therefore, India is deeply concerned with the stability of the region. "In this complex scenario, India has a daunting task. Any survival of terrorism in the region is bound to spill over to Jammu & Kashmir. There is a lot of commonality between the Indian stand and that of the US, there is not and cannot be a total convergence of interests."<sup>173</sup>

The Central Asian states are constitutionally secular and politics has been kept beyond the purview of religion. Indigenous form of Islam in these republics is not exclusive, intolerant or obscurantist; it is of the Sufi variant. The core issue, which is a cause of worry to both India and the Central Asian countries, is the increase in radical Islam and its associated terrorism. India's composite culture, with its large Muslim population and modernising and secular polity, may prove to be more attractive for the Central Asians, than the fundamentalist emphasis on Islam in some of the neighbouring Muslim countries.

Trade between India and Central Asian states is insignificant as the Indian government and business industry has not made any worthwhile investment in the region, mainly due to the conditions of instability and unpredictability of the regimes' attitudes. Investment by Western companies has also been based on their governments providing security guarantees. Similar security guarantees from the Indian state would be necessary

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<sup>173</sup> Vcd, Mahender, n. 152, p. 19.

before any meaningful investment made in Central Asia by the Indian private sector. There is a vast potential for trade between the two, with “complementarity in terms of resources, manpower and markets.”<sup>174</sup> India had been exporting garments and other consumer goods to the region during the Soviet era, but now China offered cheaper goods to these states, reducing India’s trade to miniscule levels. Indian expertise and resources, especially in the banking, financial, agricultural, and pharmaceutical and information technology sectors have vast potential in the region. The Indian government has also not been able to manage adequately secure opportunities for the Indian business community in Central Asia, who are shy of investing in an insecure region. Though India has signed numerous agreements, these have not been translated into specific programmes or projects. Only eight or ten major Indian firms have shown interest in joint ventures here. India could assist by helping in the infrastructural development, construction of industrial and infrastructural projects, hydro-electric projects, defence cooperation, education and information technology. India could also assist in setting up and functioning of educational institutions.

India is an expanding market for energy. With 60% of India’s oil consumption demand being met through imports, the economy likely to grow at an annual rate of above 6% per annum over the next few years, there will be an increased demand for oil and gas which if imported from Central Asia through a viable route will boost trade between the two in other sectors also. Thus, the region as a supplier of its energy needs becomes a region of great strategic significance for India.

India is keen to join the SCO, but on its terms – when the member states agree to keep in mind India’s sensitivities, concerns and national interests. Also, while Russia, Tajikistan, Kyrgystan and Kazakhstan want India to enter the club, China desires the entry of Pakistan.

Out of the two most important states of the region – Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, India can strike a close relationship with the former. Uzbekistan has no major oil and gas deposits, and has been cosyng up with Pakistan off and on. The Uzbek population is more inclined towards conservative form of Islam, and is supposedly less secular as compared to other Central Asian states. Kazakhstan has steered a strictly secular course, has vast energy resources, and its economic potential is tremendous. It is Kazakhstan’s geo-strategic location that strikes a common cord between India and Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan fears China more than Russia, its two major neighbours. It is keen to have its own independent and self sufficient security set up. However, the region is now hemmed in by USA, Russia, China, and Islamic

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<sup>174</sup> Roy, Meena Singh, n. 172, p. 50.

fundamentalists; and Kazakhstan is feeling squeezed, especially when its competitor in the region – Uzbekistan – is trying to closely align with USA, while at the same time not being averse to striking a deal with Pakistan or even the Taliban, in spite of their shaded past. India, on the other hand has maintained cordial relations with all the Central Asian states, and is perceived as positive by most. However, the major road blocks to India-Kazakhstan cooperation are “the problem of connectivity to the region, apprehensions of Indian manufacturing and investment companies about entering the new, unfamiliar markets of Central Asia, non-availability of hard currency and lack of banking channels.”<sup>175</sup> India has made considerable progress in establishing close relationship with Kyrgystan and Tajikistan, providing them with financial and technical assistance.

The Central Asian states and India are both deeply concerned about the increase in Islamic fundamentalism. India may need to focus greater attention and make an all out effort to garner maximum support and synergy in combating its own cross border terrorism. The best way to generate mutual trust and confidence building is by increasing cultural and economic ties with the region. It is, therefore, in India’s interests to consolidate forces of socio-religious tolerance in this region, and prevent the spread of Islamic fundamentalism sponsored by Pakistan. The growing instability in the region has always had a direct impact on India’s security. Thus, it is in India’s strategic interests to ensure that the region remains stable and that no external powers exploit the situation. As Kashmir is located on the periphery of the Central Asian region, it cannot be isolated from the political developments, which take place in Central Asian region. Any advance by the Islamic fundamentalist groups there could invigorate the same elements active in Kashmir.

The region is contiguous to the Golden Crescent that is the centre of world’s opium trade and production. The close nexus between drug smugglers, Pakistan’s intelligence agencies, Islamic fundamentalist organisations in the region to the North and North West of India pose a serious threat to India’s integrity and sovereignty. Moreover, Central Asia remains highly vulnerable to smuggling of fissile materials for weapons of mass destruction, in addition to drugs smuggling. Routes, which have been created for illegal drug trafficking can also be used for transporting components of weapons of mass destruction. India is deeply concerned about the possibility of the nuclear fissile material in this region falling in the hands of Islamic fundamentalist countries and Pakistan.

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid, p. 59.

India is handicapped in this region by the absence of geographical contiguity. The existing method of air transport of Indian goods to Central Asian capitals and/or by the circuitous sea route via Black Sea ports is very expensive and does not make our goods competitive in Central Asian markets. The necessity for developing a means of surface transport to the region from India needs no overstating. A memorandum of understanding was signed between India, Iran and Turkmenistan on April 18, 1995, which provides for surface transportation of goods between India and Central Asia across Iran. This agreement is of historic importance. Once this route becomes operational in the near future, trade and economic transactions are likely to expand manifold. India is also developing new transit routes through the Caspian Sea and Russia. Another transit route, which has been widely discussed, is the use of the Chinese link through Xinjiang Province. India could use this road by constructing a link road in Ladakh joining Tibet-Xinjiang Highway. However, the sensitivity of Indian population will need to be kept in mind for the use of this road, part of which has been constructed by China over Aksai Chin, a part of India occupied by China during the 1962 war, and period preceding it.

India has been making efforts at cultivation of good relations with these republics. Visits have been exchanged between the leadership of both sides. Numerous agreements have been signed between the Central Asian republics and India with the aim of expanding cooperation in various fields. Indian entrepreneurs and businesspersons have been encouraged to do business with the Central Asian states and open joint ventures with them. Indian cultural centres are also functioning at Tashkent and Alma Ata. India has offered facilities for training Central Asian personnel in various fields. The recent visit by the Indian foreign minister in Jan 2003 to Tajikistan and Kyrgystan is a step in the direction of India consolidating its relations with these states.

## **CHAPTER V**



## CHAPTER-V

### CONCLUSION

An effort has been made to discuss major strategic issues that confront Central Asia today. The global geopolitics is changing at a fast pace, and recent events have catapulted Central Asia at the centre of the world's geopolitics. The years ahead will be difficult for the region, and momentous events that are likely to unfold will demand mature and well thought out decisions from the Central Asian leadership. The region is confronted with great power rivalry at its doorstep, with US, Russian and Chinese forces the closest to each other since the Second World War, in an area of tense competition between them. Islamic fundamentalism is also knocking at its doors, having already made an indiscreet entry, with various fundamentalist forces operating or hibernating in the region. Putting all these elements in the Central Asian boiling pot of ethnic and clan rivalries transcending national boundaries, fractious society, mass disillusionment with the ruling elite, poverty, and lawlessness make the situation as extremely explosive.

Located in the centre of the Eurasian landmass, the Central Asian states have considerable strategic importance. The majority of the population of these countries is Muslim, though they are divided on ethnic lines, spilling across borders. The power structures here are still dominated by officials of the previous communist regimes, which have assumed new liberal national identities. The region is going through a profound transition with the countries liberalising and privatising their economies. For the land-locked states of the region, struggling to integrate themselves with the world economy, the search for access routes to the sea has become one of the most important preoccupations. International financial bodies have assessed Central Asia as the source of raw materials for the next century. Hence, many countries are vying with each other to grab a share of the vast economic potential of the region. The region's geopolitical significance, its location at the centre of important trade routes and in close proximity to the volatile Middle East, availability of vast natural resources, internal instability conditions, ethnic tensions and location of hub of international terrorism in Afghanistan-Pakistan, all make the region an arena of great power rivalry, creating a plethora of external and internal threats.

The Central Asian-Caspian Basin oil and gas reserves are seen as alternatives to Gulf supplies to major energy users of the world – Europe, North America and the potential markets of China and the India. With vast energy resources, the region is once again in the

centre of great power rivalry. USA aims to retain its pre-eminent status in the world by controlling the world's energy resources. This was one of the main reasons for the US to attack Iraq. The other major reason possibly was to retain ascendancy over Islamic fundamentalist forces. US policy envisages a pre-emptive strike on the enemy, rather than wait for the latter to strike first. US military presence in Middle East – Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait – Central Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan gains relevance in this context.

The Trans Caucasus transportation corridor connecting major centres of world trade also make Central Asia as strategically important. The dream of a Trans Asian corridor has become a guiding motif for Pakistan, which has long been eager to penetrate Central Asia. The international security mechanism operating these corridors would need to ensure proper security for these corridors. Any development of oil and gas resources and creating transportation corridors by Western companies would necessarily imply the consideration of providing adequate security of the region by the Western countries, as it will have a direct bearing on their interests.

“Developments in security affairs in the Central Asian region certainly have the potential to transform the area into one of serious confrontation between different regional and extra regional countries, but the possibility of a direct military role for the USA/ NATO in regional affairs seems remote at best, and in fact both impractical and counter productive to Western interests.”<sup>176</sup> This still seems to be a realistic appraisal in spite of heavy US presence in the region. It desires to steer clear of intra-Central Asia disputes and conflicts; while managing the course of geopolitics of the region by its mere presence. Efforts to create national military forces are being made by the Central Asian states under conditions of acute economic stringency, and the national Armed Forces of these states are going to remain weak for quite some time, with most of them except Uzbekistan, accepting Russian involvement in their security affairs.

The countries of the region do not face any serious external conventional threat, for the time being. However, interference in each other's internal affairs, threats of Islamic fundamentalism and revolution, international terrorism, and instability of regimes are serious causes of concern. The territorial and boundary problems can escalate into a conflict situation, especially with the resurgence of Uzbek nationalism and its efforts to take on the mantle of regional leadership. Such an effort would be strongly contested by Kazakhstan, who is also vying for the status of regional leadership. The risks that exist in the region are

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<sup>176</sup> Chufirin, Gennady, n. 79, p. 480.

instability of political regimes, disparities in economic development, ethnic and religious differences and polarisation, drug trafficking and mafia, absence of essential infrastructure, susceptibilities to pan-Islamic and pan-Turkish influences. Moreover, alienation of a large section of the population on tribal and clan basis by the ruling tribal groupings, like in Uzbekistan, is a strong ground for intra-state conflicts to erupt. Such internal conflicts can erupt as a result of faulty and lopsided distribution of wealth and economic largesse, resulting in economic, political and social struggle for fair distribution of wealth and state resources. Internal instability could also occur as a result of the fall-outs of a fractious and divided society, poor governance, frustration and disillusionment in the population and lack of basic democratic rights.

The process of transformation of former Soviet republics and their societies that is presently going on is a unique one. The benefits of a successful transition to an open, democratic and market-oriented society integrated into the international community should not be expected before 2015 at the earliest, though none of the Central Asian states are sincerely attempting travel along this path. Thus, the biggest internal threat being faced by the Central Asian states is economic. It has taken them almost ten years to bring their GDP to pre-independence levels. This loss of productivity, along with failure and/or closure of Soviet era welfare schemes in health and education, mass unemployment and corruption have resulted in large scale disillusionment with the current regime, which is further accentuated by lack of democratic reforms.

The export of Islamic fundamentalism from the Afghanistan-Pakistan nexus is a potent threat that looms large over the region. In the foreseeable future, the region faces a serious onslaught from Islamic fundamentalism. However, with most states having religious and ethnic disparities, with strong clan, tribal and regional loyalties, and the ruling elite vary of Islamic revivalism; it is highly unlikely that radical Islam could grow as a movement in the short term. Its likelihood has been further reduced with the defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and with heavy international commitment in the region. Islamic extremism can only take roots in the region as a result of popular disenchantment and dissatisfaction with the government, when the latter is unable to deliver the social and economic needs of the people, and as a consequence of poor governance and corruption. In that scenario, politicised Islam can become a vehicle for social justice and for the opposition to take on the government. It is in this context that Islam acquires a special significance and its true function, not only as a source of spiritual nourishment for individuals, but also as the cultural foundation of Central Asian culture and language. In the process of state formation, it is clear that the opposition

has been trying to use Islam to achieve its goals, but it does not imply that there is a danger of Islamic fundamentalism. These threats at present seem over-stated. In the near future, the individual states are likely to plough their own separate paths, because of a clash of ethnic and national interests.

Both IMU and HT, the two most threatening extremist organisations, profess the extremist ideology of Islam preached in Islamic centres in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, and not the indigenous Sufi culture. They profess the extremist ideology as preached by the Wahhabi and Deobandi schools of learning – mainly the groupings under the patronage of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. In Central Asia, “the Wahhabis are growing in number and expanding their efforts to publish and spread their literature with Saudi financing. At the same time, the state has no money to publish textbooks for schools. In addition, they are able to attract youths by offering them the opportunities to study abroad on preferential terms, mostly in Saudi Arabia, Libya, Egypt and other Islamic countries. Wahhabism attracts people who desire to follow the true path because of its simplified rights and norms. The danger of political Islam is impossible to eradicate and win by force. Only peaceful, cultural Islam can defeat political Islam.”<sup>177</sup> With the states taking no steps at promoting the alternative Sufi Islam, and the ‘official clergy’ also promoting the Wahhabi model though inadvertently, the task of the extremist elements has become that much easier.

The development of nationalism in these states will depend largely on the attitude of the political and cultural elite, political development of society, rewriting of the nations’ historical and cultural heritage, treatment meted out to non-titular ethnic groups, and a cultural revivalism of religion. The revival of religion, especially political Islam has the potential to influence the internal political evolution of these states, while keeping extremist elements at bay. It would mainly depend on the participation of political Islam in the political process in the states. The impact of religion on national political dynamics will depend on factors like good governance, economic development, performance of existing political elite and institutions, influence of the international community, and the effect of religious trends in other countries. A suitable role for political Islam in a democratic set up may be able to wean the common man away from the influence of fundamentalist elements.

Post September 11, 2001, Uzbekistan has become the favourite and de facto client state of the Americans in Central Asia, with political, economic and security benefits accruing to Uzbekistan as a result. This has created a complex situation with the other states

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<sup>177</sup> Moldaliev, Orozbek, n. 63, p. 261.

fearing Uzbek domination. Uzbekistan, under Islam Karimov, has been exhibiting expansionist tendencies, and is aspiring for a regional power status. It has also talked of a 'Greater Uzbekistan' and the neighbours fear that Karimov will be encouraged now to resort to force to resolve border disputes with other states. Moreover, internally the Karimov regime will become more and more dictatorial, suppressing all opposition in the name of fighting Islamic fundamentalism. "But that will not alter the American relations with Uzbekistan. Here one can cite the example of Saudi Arabia: its cooperation has lasted for decades, but without bringing about a democratisation of the regime."<sup>178</sup> American presence in Uzbekistan and its support to the Karimov regime are considered as setbacks to democratic reforms in the region. This will create further disillusionment in the society, driving more and more people to Islamic extremist organisations. Karimov seems to be making efforts to create a situation like that of Pakistan, where USA has no alternative but to support his regime, as the alternative will be considered as more risky by the USA.

American and European involvement in the region is at the cost of Russia and Iran, whose sphere of influence is being squeezed. Their greatest asset is free access to the region's resources, while US is proposing pipeline routes that bypass both of them. Iran has been following a pragmatic policy of economic engagement with the region, avoiding any talk of an Islamic revolution. USA is also concerned with growing Chinese influence in the region, and is aware of future energy needs of that country. US domination of Central Asian energy resources may also apply a squeeze on Chinese economy in the long term.

Russia has adopted a guarded approach to entry of US forces in Central Asia, but not for the long term. George W. Bush, President of USA, in his pre-Presidential foreign policy presentation had said, "In the breadth of its land, the talent and courage of its people, the wealth of its resources, and then reach of its weapons, Russia is a Great Power, and must always be treated as such,"<sup>179</sup> acknowledging Russian importance in its scheme of things. During the same presentation, he talked of China "as a competitor, not a strategic partner."<sup>180</sup> This phrase was absent from the State of the Union speech in Jan 2002, where he talked of a desire to cooperate with Russia, China and India to combat terrorism. With Russian power on the decline, and its influence in Central Asia diminishing due to its inability to sustain these relationships economically, a power vacuum was being felt in a region of extreme strategic importance. This was attempted to be filled initially by the Muslim world. China has been

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<sup>178</sup> Rumer, Boris, n. 59, p., 65.

<sup>179</sup>Chandra, Satish, n. 53, p. 57.

making slow but deliberate inroads into the region through trade and economic relations. USA initially adopted a wait and watch policy, as it did not want to antagonize Russia, since the area was considered as Russia's area of influence. However, it was not in US national interests to let an area that is central to the world, with large oil and gas reserves, which are geo-politically extremely significant, to go into the realm of Chinese or Muslim influence, both of which were considered as US's competitors in the region. Therefore, USA grabbed the opportunity offered by Osama bin Laden to effect its military presence in the region.

Russia has slowly upgraded its relationship with China to 'good neighbourly', then 'constructive partnership' and finally 'strategic partnership', by declaring multi-polarity as an important element of its National Security policy. Both Russia and China are pursuing multi pronged strategy of seeking 'space and manoeuvrability' in all directions, while seeking extended engagement and cooperation with USA. At the same time, direct confrontation with USA is attempted to be avoided. China's ambitions in Central Asia (particularly an oil pipeline that has major strategic implications) will inevitably clash with that of Russia, which does not want to relinquish its hold over the region. The clash will pit an economically strong China against a declining Russia, though the latter has substantial military advantage in Central Asia.

Russia views the post-Soviet world as a multi polar world with several power centres as opposed to the current one in which US supremacy is the defining feature of international relations. September 11, 2001 has resulted in a strategic realignment between Moscow and Washington. Russia is important to USA not only for its war on terrorism but also for serving its long term strategic goals of targeting terrorists' money flow, and identification and elimination of Al Qaeda network in the world. USA is still concerned about Russian nuclear cooperation with Iran and Russia's opposition to sanctions and war against Iraq. However, though Russia opposed US war on Iraq, it has simultaneously tried to adjust to the new world reality post-Saddam. Post September 11, Putin offered "intelligence sharing, opening airspace for US airplanes to supply humanitarian assistance to anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, tacit endorsement for offer made by Central Asian states of logistic support to US military for Operation Enduring Freedom. Later, Russia agreed to participate in international cooperation to target terrorists' financial networks, and reinforce its military units in Tajikistan to counter the flow of drugs out of Afghanistan and prevent terrorists from escaping across

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid, p. 57.

Afghanistan's borders into Central Asia."<sup>181</sup> Russian cooperation with US had positive influence over other neighbouring states like China and Iran, who had no choice but to follow Russia in giving political support. Putin gave his whole hearted support to USA to create an international coalition in support of the latter's anti terrorist campaign. Russia provided USA with critical and sensitive intelligence about Taliban deployment, training camps, locations etc. It gave positive support to USA because it has faced terrorism at home for years in Chechnya, and had warned the international community much earlier about the threat of terrorism, and the threat posed by global terrorist networks that were linked to training camps in Afghanistan, and funded by Islamist groups worldwide. Russia saw the US operations as directly helping it in its fight against Chechen rebels, as their training camps in Afghanistan would be destroyed.

India has a large stake in Central Asia both from the point of view of geo-strategic stability in the region and the tapping of its vast economic potential. As Pakistan steps up its drive to emerge as the key player in the geopolitical evolution of Central Asia, India will have to get over its lethargy and play an active role in this region. Though India has taken a few steps in the right direction, a lot more needs to be done to reciprocate the responsiveness shown by Central Asia.

The very essence for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has been to put forward an alternative paradigm for dealing with issues of regional and international cooperation and security. However, both USA and Russia will not tolerate any Chinese expansionism, and therefore, they may come together to meet this threat. The first signs of this cooperation are already visible with Russia cooperating with USA in its fight against international terrorism, and is not overly averse to US entry in its backyard.

US unilateral action in Iraq has caused shivers up the spine of many a government in the world. It has become amply clear that any regime not prepared to be manipulated by US, and not towing the US line should be prepared to face the axe. After an easy victory in Iraq, USA is in an invincible position. It has commenced secret talks with Iran and positive developments in the relations between the two may be visible in the near future. A realignment of forces in the Middle East-Central Asian region may not, therefore be far away. Iran offers easy and cheap oil and gas pipeline routes to the West from the Caspian Sea-Central Asian region, while making substantial profits in the process. Another fallout of the

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<sup>181</sup> Oksana Antonenko, n. 147, p. 50.

Iraq war would be that USA will be able to manipulate the Central Asian states more easily, with its bases already present in most of these states.

USA is here to stay in the region from Saudi Arabia to the borders of Xinjiang and Siberia, sitting in the midst of the Muslim arc, while keeping a close watch on likely Chinese expansionist forays into Central Asia. It wants to retain the status of the sole super power by controlling the world's energy resources and transportation highways, restricting geopolitical expansion by its potential adversaries – Islamic fundamentalist forces, China and to some extent Russia. Intense Great Power rivalry is expected in the years ahead in Central Asia as part of the 'New Great Game'.



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