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The Militarisation of Central Asia – A New Great Game?

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Introduction

Captain Arthur Connolly of the British East India Company coined the phrase, 'The Great Game', in mid-1800s, to describe the contest for supremacy between Czarist Russia and Victorian England in Central Asia. At the start of the 21st century, more than a decade after the implosion of the former Soviet Union, energy and mineral rich Central Asia (the region comprising Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan), has regained its strategic significance, and is again set to play a key role in geopolitics. The significance of Central Asia lies in its geostrategic location – with Russia to its north, China to its east, Iran and Afghanistan to its south – and its natural resources. Central Asia is an energy rich region with abundant natural gas, oil, hydel power, and rich deposits of Uranium. Central Asia is also home to large deposits of precious metals such as gold and silver. However, this time around, the players have changed. Russia will continue to be a player, thanks to geography, and will be joined by the United States and two Asian powers – China and India. The players of this 'New Great Game' are vying for military bases in this strategically vital region. The chess moves in this international power play interacting with Central Asia's political, economic, ethnic, and religious faultlines are producing a complicated security dynamics with profound strategic consequences for the region and the world at large.

US Seeks Engagement

The US strategic interest in the region pre-dates the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. After the implosion of the Soviet Union, the US worked actively to de-nuclearize Kazakhstan, which was born nuclear as it inherited a part of the Soviet nuclear arsenal. The US successfully accomplished this task by the end of 1995. The US became interested in the region again after the February 1999 terrorist bombings in Tashkent and the incursions by the International Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) into Kyrgyzstan in the summers of 1999 and 2000. However, it must be emphasized that the US was reluctant to make major strategic commitments in the CARs before September 11.

The war against terrorism changed that and led the US to build military infrastructure in Khanabad, Uzbekistan, where elements of its 10th Mountain Division are deployed. The US also deployed F-15E and FA-18 tactical aircraft at the Manas air base in Kyrgyzstan, where it is upgrading the infrastructure to accommodate military cargo aircraft. The massive construction going on in these bases will allow the US to hold thousands of troops and it seems like that the US has ensconced itself in the region for the long haul. Central Asian governments were keen to strategically engage the US for domestic political reasons and as a counterbalance against Russia. This is the first time that the US has obtained a strategic foothold in what is traditionally perceived to be Russia's sphere of influence. America, which has always had a military presence along China's eastern borders, has now established itself militarily in Kyrgyzstan, immediately to the west of China's volatile Xinjiang province.

Russia's Continuing Influence

Russia continues to remain a significant player in the region even though its strategic clout has diminished somewhat due to the presence of the US military in the region and the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) with China as its informal leader. Russia has vital interests at stake here, as destabilization in the CARs will result in the rise of militant Islam in Russia's troubled south, terrorism, refugee inflow, transnational crime and narcotics traffic. Russia does not intend to marginalize itself in Central Asia. In October 2003, Russia opened a military base in Kant in Kyrgyzstan, its first on foreign soil since the USSR imploded, which is not far from the American air base in Manas. The Russians will station Su-27 fighter jets, Su-25 bombers, Il-76, An-26 cargo plane, and one L-39 training plane at the base.

Russia claims that its military base at Kant will serve as a deterrent to international terrorism and spearhead the SCO's rapid reaction forces. It also claims that the American military base at Manas is engaged in the stabilization of Afghanistan, while the Russian air base will take care of the security of the Commonwealth of Independent States in their southern borders. Whether or not Russia is able to perform combat operations from Kant, the symbolic message to Washington is loud and clear. Russia is also trying to convert its military deployments in Tajikistan into a permanent base. Russia can no longer pretend to be the security guarantor in Central Asia, but nor can the US pretend to be the new arbiter in regional disputes here. The emerging security dynamics is far more complicated.

China's Ascending Role in the Region

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, China sought to limit the spillover effect of ethnic nationalism from the newly formed CARs into its Western provinces, especially Xinjiang. Xinjiang's native Turkic-Muslim Uighurs are closer culturally and ethnically to Central Asians than to Han Chinese. Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism that has flourished in Afghanistan and Tajikistan has direct implications for its sensitive Xinjiang province. With its growing economy and its increasing energy dependency, China is also keen to get access to Central Asian energy sources. China was also concerned about the fact that all of Central Asia's operational linkages to the outside world ran through Russia. Fears about American military encirclement have increased China's drive for greater influence in Central Asia.

China is trying to exert its influence in the region by promoting commercial interests. After the then Chinese Premier Li Peng's visit to Central Asia in 1994, the CARs have begun to trade with the East Asian nations, the US, and Australia through Chinese ports. China is also focusing on reviving the ancient Silk Route network by building a rail/road bridge through Central Asia to connect Europe with China. China became the first major Asian player in the region with the establishment of the regional politico-security organization – the Shanghai Five (comprising China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) – in 1996, which was renamed Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001 after Uzbekistan was admitted. The SCO has legalized for the first time the projection of Chinese troops beyond China's borders if one or the other signatories requests its support. China is also keen on developing military-to-military ties with the CARs as is evidenced by the fact that it conducted joint military exercises last year in October with Kazakhstan aimed at coordinating their response to terrorism.

India's Extended Strategic Neighbourhood

India, which has historical and civilizational links with Central Asia, from the Vedic Indo-Aryan speakers through the Kushan Empire to the Mughals, has only recently tried to position itself geostrategically in the region. It officially entered the region during the past one year with the establishment of its airbase in Ayni, Tajikistan. Afghanistan and Pakistan are key actors in the CARs as well. India entered Tajikistan to counter Pakistani influence in Afghanistan after India and Pakistan closed their airspace to one another in the aftermath of the December 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament. In the war against Taliban, India provided clandestine help to the Northern Alliance by running a 25-bed hospital in Farkhor, Tajikistan, near the Afghan border. Through Tajikistan India also supplied high altitude warfare equipment worth US\$8 million

to the Northern Alliance, advised the Northern Alliance in operations against the Taliban, and its helicopter technicians from the Aviation Research Center of its Research and Analysis Wing repaired Northern Alliance's Soviet made Mi-17 and Mi-35 attack helicopters in Tajikistan.

India's operations out of Tajikistan would not have been possible without a tacit approval from Uzbekistan and Iran as Indian supply aircraft would have needed overflight rights through these countries to reach Tajikistan. An unstated goal of India's engagement with Central Asia (and Tajikistan in particular which shares a border with China) is to restrain the rival growth of Chinese power and influence in the region just as Pakistan and China were seeking enhanced influence in Central Asia to encircle India strategically and economically. Like China, an economically growing India is also interested in the vast energy and mineral wealth of the CARs. India, which is not geographically contiguous with the CARs, is working on the North-South corridor for energy and trade together with Iran and Russia, which will enhance its access to energy and trade from these countries as well as the CARs.

Conclusion

The major powers want to gain a strategic foothold in the energy-rich region, while the host regimes are seeking protection from powerful regional and global powers against both regional and internal challenges. The militarisation of Central Asia is likely to divide the region into proxies of major powers. This is a dangerous trend for two reasons. First, there is significant strategic rivalry between the major powers. The United States, which is the sole pole of the current international system, wants to hedge itself militarily against a resurgent Russia in the future and an economically and militarily rising China. Their membership in the SCO notwithstanding, there are major misgivings in the Russo-Chinese strategic relationship given that Russia is a declining power and China an emerging one.

India entered the region to announce its arrival as a regional Asian power and to counter Chinese and Pakistani influence. China has strategic ties with Pakistan, which is India's rival in South Asia. India is unlikely to join the SCO, which has both China and Russia as its members, but not the US, as a strategic alignment between the US and India has been underway since the end of the Cold War. Second, and more importantly, Central Asia is an extremely volatile region where violent clashes within and between states have already occurred and are likely to occur again.

The worrying factor is that the major powers may get involved in regional conflicts. The ethnic and socio-economic diversity of the CARs coupled with weak regimes makes internal and regional conflicts a very real possibility. This danger is exacerbated by border conflicts (e.g., Ferghana Valley), radical Islam, rampant corruption, drug trade, criminal activity, the increasing danger of HIV/AIDS, water scarcity, and the "youth bulge" in an economically stagnant region. The US, Russia, China, and India may seek to defend their interests in the region if threatened. At the same time, the presence of major powers in the region is also an opportunity for Central Asia to get things right as regional stability will encourage the Central Asian leaders to liberalize the political and economic systems in their countries. However, the way the major powers pursue their strategic goals in the region will decide the future of Central Asia and strategic stability in the world at large. The biggest cause of concern is that till now no major power has made any significant investment in the CARs outside the energy sector and at the same time is ignoring the dismal human rights record of the weak Central Asian regimes.

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