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Dynamics of Energy Geopolitics of Central Asia¹

ABSTRACT

Geopolitics is the study of international relations and conflicts from geographical perspective, in other words it is also defined as the practice of states, competing for the dominance and control the territory. Central Asia, due to its geopolitical importance has always attracted the attention of all major schools of geopolitical thoughts especially, 'the school of political landscape' (English school) and school of geopolitical organism' (German school). This region has also been the core of Russian and the former Soviet Union's geopolitical imagination. Since the emergence of independent Central Asian States (CAS), struggle has erupted to control space in this region for hydrocarbon resources and various other reasons.

Russia has reclaimed this region for controlling energy supply from the Central Asian Region (CAR) to the countries of Asia, Europe and other parts of the world. China is focusing on the energy resources of this region to reduce its energy dependency on Middle East and Africa countries. For China security of the import of the hydrocarbon resources through the Indian Ocean is also a reason to pay attention towards the CAR. The US and EU need central Asian energy to reduce dependency on Russian gas supply to Europe. Pakistan and India are also potential players in the central Asian energy game. These countries are also trying hard to engage but due to different geopolitical problems and difficulties have not been successful. Turkey, a west Asian country with rapidly growing economy is trying to tap central Asian energy with the help of Iran. Thus, a detailed analysis of the energy politics of global players in the Central Asia is the subject matter of this paper. Players in the region divided in three category, all three category power's policies and achievement are discussed in the given paper.

Methodology: The study is based on secondary data and information. The analysis is based on empirical, historical, comparative, descriptive methods and critical qualitative assessment of the events and political developments in the study region.

Key words: *Central Asia, Geopolitics, Geo-strategy, Energy politics, Energy economy, Gas pipeline, Terrorism.*

Geopolitics is the study of 'struggle for space'. In the beginning, this struggle was for best hunting areas, later it transformed into the fight for agriculture and settlement areas. As the world entered in industrial age, space struggle also took new shape to secure favourable spaces for industrial development like best relative location, raw material or natural resources, market and transportation routes (land, water and air) etc. Therefore location, size, shape, population, natural resources and industrial capacity emerged as the prime factor in geopolitics. This struggle is old as human civilization itself, therefore, its references are also found in the writings of ancient philosopher like Aristotle, Hecataeus, Herodotus Anaximander, Eratosthenes, Thales and Ptolemy etc., but as an academic discipline, it started to take shape in late of eighteenth century. Two geographers, Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1992) and Rudolf Kjellen (1864-1922) developed geopolitical thought and ideas in favour of Germany, and it was Kjellen who coined the term 'geopolitics' (Dodds, 2008). A.T. Mahan (1889), a navel historian and geopolitical thinker of US, compared land and sea powers in his famous thesis 'Influence of Sea upon History' and suggested his government to develop navel power because in the struggle between navel and land power, it was former which has always been a winner (Mahan, 1890). Sir Halford John Mackinder (1861-1947), an English geographer and academician, changed the whole notion of geopolitics through his very illustrious theory of 'Heart Land'. He introduced this theory at Royal Geographic Society on January 25th 1904, through his paper titled 'Geographical Pivot of History' (MacKinder, 1904). Though, he did not use the term geopolitics, but in later years his ideas and work became the main instrument of imperial Britain to achieve its geopolitical goals. At the same time, Karl Ernst Haushofer (1869-1946), a German geopolitician, geographer, general and founder of German school of geopolitics' developed the theory of living space and heartland to achieve the Germany geopolitical goals. In the mid of 20th century many US geopolitical thinker emerged among them Nicholas John Spykman (1893-1943), Isaiah Bowman (1878-1950) and Alexander N. P. de Seversky (1894-1974) contributed significantly. These US thinkers were influenced by Mackinder's heartland and his bird eye view of the world (Tuathail, 1998).

Location, size and natural resources of a region are some of the prime factors of geopolitics; hence Central Asian Region (CAR) with all three factors emerged dominantly in the geopolitical imagination of Mackinder, Haushofer and Spykman. Mackinder highlighted geostrategic importance of the CAR in his "heartland theory" which later became the main instrument of British foreign policy especially to counter the Russian influence in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Russia also recognised the geostrategic importance of CAR and conquered and to create a buffer between Russia and British India. Later on USSR systematically annexed this region. German geopoliticians were interested to capture this region for its oil resources not for its location. So, in the Second World War, Germany tried to capture Azerbaijan's oil fields of Baku (Agayev, summer 1995). To contain USSR Spykman and George Kennan also focused on importance of location of the CAR in their famous theory 'Rim Land' and 'Long Telegram'.

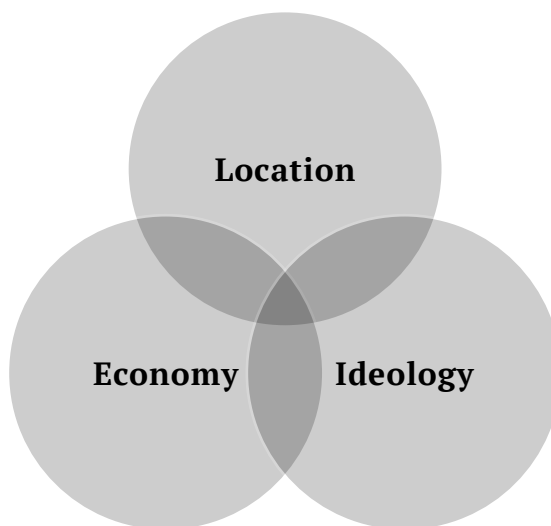
After Second World War, study of geopolitics declined academically because of its role in German offence, as some experts had termed it as 'intellectual poison'. The CAR also went out of frame of geopolitical discussion because erstwhile USSR had controlled it. Britain had left India and there was not any regional and global power to claim the region. But, after the demise of USSR and the independence of the CAR, global and regional powers rushed to have influence in the region for various reasons. Again this region

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started to have significant portion of geopolitical researches dedicated to it all over the world.

As defined in the beginning, geopolitics is the study of struggle for space. Here the term “space” is more elaborate and includes all types of spaces, especially geographic, economic, outer space, social space and cultural space. In the present study, three dimensions of geopolitics have been identified covering all major aspects of an area or region e.g. location on globe (absolute and relative), economy and ideology (Figure 1). The location dimension includes physical landscape (physiographic, Physical setting), size (comparative area) and shape (geographic distribution of land) of the region. The dimension of economy discusses basic resource base, market size and potential and nature of economic system. The dimension of ideology covers political and social aspects, basic political and social organizations and their structure. In geopolitical studies of a region all these three dimensions overlap each other the percentage share of overlap may vary from region to region and from time to time. Generally, these dimensions are not found existing and operating independently.

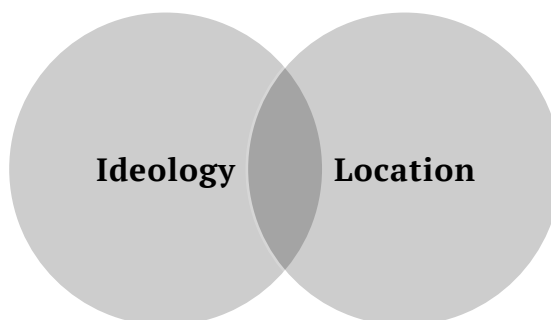
Figure: 1 Three Dimensions of Geopolitics



According to this three dimensional approach of geopolitical study, position (relative importance) of Central Asia has changed according to world geopolitical system. At the time of imperial geopolitical order (till 1940) it was the “location” of Central Asia which was the most important factor dimension in the studies of this region but after the cold war its natural resources (energy resources) become dominant in geopolitical discourse. This has led to the emergence of economic dimension of the CAR in geopolitical and academic discussions.

After the breakup of the erstwhile USSR, US took special interest in the region not only for its natural resources but for its location also. China being a big emerging power and a neighbour was increasing its influence in the region. Iran being an influential neighbour also developed its regional aspirations. Russia, with big influence in its neighbour was still a dominating and a natural regional power. India and Pakistan had also started taking interest in the region. For these reasons, US found this region as best suited to exert its influence and contain these competitors. During the Soviet period, social and cultural structures were communised, but, at the base level, Islam had survived as a dominating faith and ideology, therefore, when the region became independent and communism collapsed, the Islamic forces emerged from inside to fill this gap at all levels. As a natural consequence of long suppression and repression these forces became against China, Russia, and the Western powers also. Russia, China and West also tried to counter these forces as they consider Islamic ideology and forces against their own ideas and interest. For these reasons ideological dimension has been discussed and debated in the present paper as one of the major factors of the relations of the CAR with different countries and vice versa. Natural resources especially hydrocarbons are in plenty in the region, but the size of its population is very small. For this reason, Central Asian states have to be depended on other countries for the development and export of their natural resources. Thus, from an academic point of view in the contemporary geopolitical order, the CAR is perfect case where all three dimensions are working together.

Figure: 2



All the countries which are active in the region are not equal in terms of their resources and other capabilities. Therefore, all the competing countries have been divided in three categories. The first category includes US, Russia and China because these countries are most influential in the region and trying to influence all three dimensions also. In the second category Iran and Turkey have been included because these countries are being affected and trying the influence at least two dimensions in the region. The third category includes those countries or powers which are focusing on the only one dimension e.g. India and Pakistan.

First Category Powers Influencing all 3 Dimensions of Geopolitics in Central Asia:

US: After the emergence of Central Asia as the most attractive geostrategic location and with huge estimated hydrocarbon reserves US rushed to Central Asia to secure its position and share. The US also wanted to play in the new 'great game' to maintain its sole superpower status. American experts including former foreign secretary Kissinger had pointed out three rivals' powers of the US i.e. Russia, China and fundamentalist Islam. All these 'rival powers' surround the CAR. Therefore, Central Asian location became very important for the US to counter its all future rivals. The US eyes were on Central Asian oil and gas also because he wants to controls these resources to pressurise or blackmail to the energy consumer of the region. The Americas European allies are also dependent on Russian gas and they also desired Central Asian oil gas as a viable option. To achieve these goals in Central Asia, the US started to work in all three dimensions. The US established good economic relations with all the CAC members and provided economic, technological aid to them. Though Central Asian governments are very autocratic and non democratic in nature. Human right violations at large level against the oppositions and peaceful religious groups is reported, but US support these regime because in free and fair election Islamic political parties may cam in the power like Egypt. American companies especially oil and gas companies took more interest in Central Asian energy resources and made large investments.

US motivated its oil and gas companies to invest and also involved directly in Caspian and Central Asian oil and gas sector. In 1996, at least 30 (out of 80) US oil and gas companies were involved in joint ventures only in Kazakhstan (The politics of oil..., 1996).

While US companies started their operations all over Central Asia, they especially focused on Kazakhstan which is the most potential country in Central Asia in terms of energy. US oil majors participated in all major projects in Kazakhstan. To develop the Tengiz oil fields Chevron invested \$ 20 billion which was the largest single investment by any US or foreign company in Central Asia before the China's engagement. The Tangiz oil field is one of the largest oil field in CAR (U.S. Chevron's investment..., 4 April 2013).

The US also established bilateral military ties with CACs and provided technical, financial and training facilities to the Central Asian militaries. The US also made Central Asian countries, a part of NATO's 'Partnership for Peace' programme to counter Islamic movements in the name of to counter the terrorism (EU-Central Asia Monitoring..., February 2012).

Till 2001, the US military presence in the CAC was not direct. It was the 9/11 which provided golden opportunity to the US to establish its military bases in the region. After 9/11 and alleged involvement of Al-Qaeda supported by Taliban government of Afghanistan, the US established its bases in Central Asia too. In this war, all Central Asian countries helped the US directly and indirectly. Though, the US had promised that after the end of the Afghan War, he will leave the area, however, later on the US refused to go back and showed its willingness to stay in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Russia and China pressurised the US through many channels especially by the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) to leave the region (Beehner, 2005). They could not succeed in getting US out from the whole area; however, they pressurizing US to leave Central Asia. Thus, after the establishment of military bases in Afghanistan, the US increased its strategic space in Central Asia especially when China and Russia came together to oppose the US presence. This opposition increased rivalry between the US and Russia on many issues. It was quite open at the time when the Russian military took action against Georgia and the consequent reaction of the US and her European allies. At the front of energy security matter also, due to the opposition of Russia and China, the US could not transform its activism as a viable alternative for herself and allies. This activism became slow after aggressive policies of Vladimir Putin and Russian involvement in her backyard energy arena.

Russia: Russia is the biggest stakeholder in the new Central Asian game. It is quite possible that the US, the EU and anti-Russian powers may use Central Asia to contain Russia, and hydrocarbons resources of the region may play an important role in this regard (Peyrouse, 2012). So in order to counter these challenges from Central Asian side, Russia has defined following goals in the region.

1. Secure Russian ethnics living in the CAR.
2. Control Central Asian hydrocarbon resources.
3. Control pipeline routes of Central Asian hydrocarbon export in international market.
4. Support Central Asian countries politically and economically with Russian-oriented policies
5. Crush the threat of religious extremists.
6. Block the drug trafficking through Central Asia from Afghanistan.
7. Protect Russian economic interests in the region.
8. Counter the influence of the US and the European Union.
9. Cooperate with friendly neighbours such as Iran and China to minimise the influence of anti-Russian forces.
10. Motivate the CAC to accept common defence mechanism under Russian leadership.
11. Guarantee necessary conditions for the placement, functioning, material and social support for strategic military forces.

In the beginning, under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin (1991 to 1999), Russia showed dullness and could not follow appropriate policies to achieve policy goals in the CAR. At that time Russia was also dependent on the EU and the US economic aid and their support to get loans from various global financial institutions. So, Russians did not take any suitable action to counter the influence of the EU and the US. In the absence of a strong presence of Russia, not only the US and the EU but India, Pakistan, Turkey and China also successfully penetrated into the CAR. After Yeltsin, Putin adopted aggressive policy and gave priority to the CAR in his foreign policy. He successfully countered the influence of the US and the EU in all spheres. Most crucially, Putin showed his skill and strength after the 9/11 and the US military was present in the Central Asia. First of all, Putin not only supported the US military action against Taliban but also provided facilities to the US. When the US successfully eliminated Taliban in Afghanistan, Putin pressurised Central Asian countries to close the US military bases. In this way Putin re-established and institutionalised the Russian influence. The Central Asian energy resources also are important for Russia as a strategic weapon. To secure energy and political interest, Putin followed 'Monroe

doctrine' like policies. Putin added Central Asian energy in Russian long-term policy in the CAR. He established a new hydrocarbon approach and boldly used hydrocarbon resources as geopolitical weapon and tightened its grip over the CAR. He also blackmailed European countries to control Central Asian energy which was an alternative to Russian gas supply to Europe. To counter the US and NATO influence, Russia extended military relations with the CACs and conducted many joint military exercises with them.

China: Though, China entered very late in the game, but, soon became a very important player. It has involved herself in Central Asia through every possible dimension. It is very interesting that even after entering late, China achieved all its foreign policy goals in the region. In the beginning, China had serious border disputes with Central Asian neighbours however, but it adopted pragmatic and soft policies to resolve these disputes without military tensions and border clashes. China successfully convinced the CAS to counter and suppress militant and separatists of Xinxiang, supported by many of their militant groups. To counter the EU's and the US's influence, China established the SCO with the help of Russia and the CAC. China invited Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan to this organisation for cooperation in regional issues. During the Afghan War, China dealt with the situation brilliantly and adopted the Russian line. In the war, China supported the NATO's actions against Taliban but after the end of the war, China with Russia successfully pressurised the US to abandon her bases from Central Asia. In energy sector too, China entered late but involved deeply very soon. China signed its first oil agreement with Kazakhstan and within a short it established energy relations with all energy producer countries. China avoided the US and EU companies for energy cooperation and made her own oil companies active in the region. China cooperated with Russian and Iranian oil companies to counter the US influence in energy sector. China has also started many pipelines (like Turkmenistan-China pipeline) to import oil from the region. China planning to increase its gas supply dependency on Turkmenistan up to 50% of its total demand.

The Second Category Powers

Turkey: Turkey has very old and unique historical, ethnical and cultural relations with the CAR. It also became one of the most aspirant countries to fill the vacuum in post soviet era. But its economic, military and technological limitation against big powers in the region could not help it to influence the region as desired. Being pragmatic, Turkey did not try to influence the region militarily and ideologically, because of the lack of capability and unique ideology. So it focused on economic and cultural relations. Turkey, a net importer of oil and gas, heavily dependent on Russia and Iran, and also searching viable alternative. Central Asia could become a good alternative for energy as Turkey is the neighbour of the region but because of geostrategic setting of the region Turkey is away from the oil and gas of the region as the EU. Iran and Russia do not like to create any alternative for Turkey because any alternative will reduce Turkey's dependency on them. For the supply of energy resources to Turkey, economic sanctions on Iran are also one of the problems and because of this route through Iran could not come in reality. Out of three suitable routes, only one through Caspian Sea (which is most difficult and costly) could materialize and the energy supplied through this route also is not for domestic consumption of Turkey but a large amount of this goes to the EU. Turkey is also focusing on areas other than energy for investment. It has become one of the leading investors in infrastructure in the CAR and Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are main destination of Turkey's investment with a share of more than 90 per cent of the total investment in the region.

Ideologically and culturally also, Turkey is trying to influence the region, but the nature of CAR's political system, (which is communist type of regime) is not allowing it to influence the region as anticipated. In the presence of China, Russia, and US, Turkey's influence in the region is going to be limited as these powers will not allow especially in the present scenario when Turkey's government is consider with Islamic routes. Turkey can counter the influence of big three or first category powers in the region with the help of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Iran: Iran has more potential than Turkey to be active in the region because of its well developed energy infrastructure and other facilities to transport Central Asian energy in international market. But, because of sanctions imposed by the US and UN, it has not been able to materialize these opportunities and potentials. Other regional and international players also do not allow Iran to engage in the region, even Russia and China have not supported Iran in this region with full confidence. Only a pipeline of 200 km from Korpedzhe in Turkmenistan to Kordkuy in Iran, which became operational in 1997 (Novikova, 2007), can be counted as a success of Iran's Central Asian energy relations. As far as Iran's cultural relations with the CAR are concerned, it has tried to create some space but the Shiite nature of Iranian state contrast with the dominant Sunni faith of the Central Asian populations. Communist type character of Central Asian political leaders is also a barrier in the relations, because they are always sceptical of the Iran's Islamic state. They are also sceptical of closeness for the reason of Iran exporting its type revolution in the region. Now, Iran is more focussed on economy then culture or political relations. It has proposed to build a Central Asian rail network to connect itself with the region. It has also proposed to provide its ports and transport network to all countries and the CAS for interlinking as Pakistan is not viable option because of security reasons.

Third Category Powers

India and Pakistan: India and Pakistan, both are energy hungry countries and Central Asia can provide them a cheap and geographically easy option for their energy requirements. Turkmenistan which has 4th largest gas reservoir and that can be transported to these countries through Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline. But, security situation in Afghanistan and dangerous enmity between India and Pakistan has delayed this project even after many agreements, talks and commitments. Even in near future also there is no hope for this project to start. India is considering the Iran's option to import energy through Arabian Sea and engage at least with Turkmenistan. Even this option is on paper only and it may take the long time. Culturally, both countries are not so much interested to engage, especially India, because of lack of common cultural philosophy. Pakistan being an Islamic country is culturally closer to the CAR but due to present nature of Central Asian regime, cultural influence of Pakistan is not much visible. But, Pakistan is trying to create a common cultural understanding in the name of Islam.

Conclusion:

Central Asia is very dynamic geopolitically. All three dimensions are very much present in the CAR. In the present situation CAR

is very calm because US and EU are heavily engaged in Middle East and Afghanistan and but as the China and Russian would come more closer and would be in position to challenge US supremacy, pressure would rise on the US to create a containment to them and CAR would be trump card for this. Therefore US strategic treaty with Afghanistan to continue presence in Afghanistan should be seen in this scenario. Terrific rise of violence in the Xinjiang region and anti Russian waves in Russian neighbour (Ukraine, Georgia) after Afghan war and US presence in the region may be seen in this perspective. In the future geopolitics of the region energy will play important role as the Russia would not allow Central Asia to become any alternative for EU of Russian energy. Iran talks with the West should be seen in this perspective because after allowing so called peaceful nuclear program to Iran, in the return, Central Asian energy flow from Iran territory would be one of the demand.

Energy geopolitics is not only to make possible access and supply for own country but to disrupt the supply of other is also the part of that. China is also increasing its dependency on CAE to reduce the risk in Indian and Pacific Ocean supply rout which can be disrupted in the clash with India and West as the tension is also rising in South China Sea. So US presence in Afghanistan and especially near the Turkmenistan would increase the pressure on China in any clash in Pacific region.

In second category of power, things would depend on success of Iran talks with West, if the talks would be successful and sanctions would remove Iran would be more active in the energy and other sector but Iran's more focus would be on Iran Pakistan, India pipeline because any possibility of TAPI (Turkmenistan- Afghanistan- Pakistan-India) pipeline would reduce the possibility of IPI. Other than this Iran would like to be active in other economic dimensions and in ideological issues because if sunni radical element would be more active in the region they can be used against Iran by West and Saudi Arabia.

Turkish Energy success will depend relation with Russia, Iran, China and US and in compression of present, in near future things are not going to change dramatically. But with the Pakistan and Iran Turkey can make new alliance in the region.

For India and Pakistan, engagement is negligible in energy sector and would be continue as the security situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan. But Pakistan and India would prefer IPI if possible option would emerge because there would be continue clash in the Afghanistan with the presence on US.

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