

CENTRAL ASIA BETWEEN FRIENDS AND FEARS: AN ANALYSIS OF UNITED STATES STRATEGIC ROLE

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Abstract

Central Asia for centuries remained as a chess board for external players who came, acted and depart. After a decade of Independence, Central Asia again became an arena of external players particularly United States. This paper will analyse American strategic role in the region since Independence. The main argument of the paper is that till 2001, the United States policy in the region was limited and confined to bilateral and economic relations but September 11, 2001, pushed US to Politico-economic and Military relations. Moreover, US get an opportunity to make hay while the sun shines. United States on the one hand engaged in encountering extremist in Af-Pak, on the other remained an active player in Eurasian to push other Great Game players out. The author insists that security challenge remained overt since independence in Central Asia whether it comes within or outside the region. The cooperation with United States made central Asia more vulnerable after their withdrawal as the extremist are expected to resurge.

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Introduction

"History knows no resting places and no plateaus."

Henry Kissinger

The beginning of 21st century was marked with the emergence of global terrorism. September 11, 2001 was a dark day in the annals of the West. A bunch of extremist hiding in remote areas of an impoverished country, dared to outrage the might of the citadel of West's democracy. Three might of US were planned by the extremist to target viz. World Trade Centre, White House and Pentagon, these are the economic, political and military might of the west respectively. As a result thousands of innocents were killed. President Bush gave a revolutionary call to the nations of the world to unite and fight against global terrorism. To be or not to be a part of the coalition against terror war the option. South Asia, West Asia, Eurasia were crucial for the west as the countries in these areas were to be or not to be a part of the coalition forces on the one hand, and were the entry points in Afghanistan on the other. Moreover, these are the Muslim majority areas and have to decide what to do and what not. The engines of extremist organizations are also in these countries [particularly Af-Pak region]. Almost all the nations welcome the step taken by US. The American determination was given a stamp of approval by the international community with Security Council adopting a resolution on counter terrorism. The resolution (No 1373) provided a framework for collective action as it sought to deny funds, recruitment, weapon supplies and safe havens for terrorists.¹ India provides diplomatic, ideological and political support to US led Global War on Terrorism. India's approach was not to destroy Afghanistan (the destination of coalition forces) but to destroy terrorism. India involved in the reconstruction process in Afghanistan. Pakistan emerged as a frontline state in the global war against terrorism. Pakistan on the one hand pledged to fight against terrorism, on the other remain a safe haven for the extremist as Pakistan's secret agency Inter-state Service Intelligence remained covert ally of extremist. Pakistan neither said good bye nor good riddance to either coalition forces or extremist. Thus, Pakistan adopted 'asymmetric strategies' to gain 'strategic depth'² in the region. The neighbouring states of Af-Pak region were very important for US as these were the entry point for the coalition forces. India, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Iran were key for the US. US gave \$600 million³ in cash to Pakistan. Central Asia whom Halford Mackinder calls "Heart land" became strategic ally of US. The remote Central Asian states have passed just one decade of their independence become an important military operation theatre for the United States. Various analysts and foreign policy commentators began to

speculate whether Central Asia would be a new battle ground for world power rivalry or left to be developed under international sponsorship or cooperation. Uzbekistan was the 1st Central Asian state that became a close partner of the West and became personal friend of US. All the central Asian states provide some sort of land, air and military support. US provide security and economic assistance to central Asian states for their cooperation in anti-terrorism, drugs trafficking, defence and other activities.⁴ After a decade of independence Central Asia experienced a unique security challenge from transnational extremists as they provide bases to the coalition forces. Uzbekistan gave the power to use, Karshi-Khanabad air base, Kyrgyzstan which firstly hesitates to cooperate in War on Terrorism finally allowed US to use Manas air base, Tajikistan allowed to use three former Soviet air bases viz. Kulyab, Khojand and Kurgan-Tyube, Kazakhstan provide air space right and emergency landing facilities and Turkmenistan remained neutral in the War on Terrorism.⁵ Since 2001, U.S. and NATO forces have partnered with Eurasian countries in fighting the war on terrorism. The Northern Distribution Network (NDN) has provided the U.S. and coalition forces with a vital transit corridor to deliver non-military supplies to Afghanistan. Connecting the Baltic and Black Sea ports with Afghanistan through Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus, the NDN serves as a key vehicle for U.S. engagement in the region.⁶

The prolong war against Terrorism in Afghanistan which is expected to conclude next year left a question mark, whether the extremist are wiped out or will resurge after the withdrawal of coalition forces. Is US does not bears the expenditure of coalition forces so decided to quit? Or is their mission has been fulfilled? No doubt upon it that the coalition forces devastated the Af-Pak region in general and Al Qaida and Taliban in particular. The weakening of Al Qaeda does not mean that it is no longer dangerous. The terrorism perpetrated by certain factions may continue after withdrawal of coalition forces, but the movement no longer has a large base of support or a safe haven. Right now, the Bin Laden group consists mainly of roving suicide bands in the valleys and mountains along Pakistan's frontier with Afghanistan may resurge after the withdrawal of coalition forces. The death of Osama Bin Laden in 2011 in Abbottabad in Pakistan led to the victory of coalition forces and weakening of extremist. One can imagine that the United States have defeated the Taliban and Al Qaida not Terrorism. Since 2001, with the cooperation of Central Asian regimes the perpetual repression of extremist organizations including those of Central Asian left a question mark that whether the central Asian regimes and

Afghanistan will handle the extremist or not? We can see the signals of threat from IMU, the most popular extremist organization of Central Asia presently located in Afghanistan. Although the IMU's leadership is based in Af-Pak tribal areas, where it coordinates attacks with the Pakistani Taliban, the IMU still considers Central Asia its main target as the IMU said, "We hope from Allah that future conquests are very near in the Mawarounnahr region [the ancient name for modern-day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan]"⁷

Global War on Terrorism and US Policy in Central Asia

Soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States moved to establish embassies to engage the strategically placed states of Central Asia. The Presidents of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan were invited to the United States, numerous Congressional delegations and cabinet secretaries have visited the region, and government ministers from these countries now regularly visit Washington. US established her relations with the newly independent Central Asian states in 1992 when the then Secretary of State, James Baker visited in Central Asian states. North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Partnership for Peace (NATO's PfP) programme made Central Asian states closer to the West. Freedom Support Act of 1992 and Silk Road Strategy Act of 1999 proved to be an economic boon for the Central Asian States.⁸ Since 2001, US engaged in the region for two major objectives.

1. To make Central Asia free from terrorism and;
2. To establish hold on natural resources of Central Asia.

To dismantle the threat of terrorism US used the territory of Central Asia for their transit and in return Central Asian states fully cooperated. US provide economic assistance to Central Asia. The secret of US involvement in Central Asia is to establish its hold on energy rich Central Asia. Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline supplies energy to the west from Azerbaijan is 100% funded by United States. US also deployed some five hundred troops for BTC security and keep a vigil eye on Iran and other states. Other U.S. interests in Central Asia include combating terrorism, drug production and proliferation, assisting the development of oil and other resources; and fostering democratization, human rights, free markets, and trade. The United States also seeks to thwart dangers posed to its security by the illicit transfer of strategic missile, nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons technologies, materials, and expertise to some states or groups, and to address threats posed by Iran as well. The US led global war against terrorism created a platform for United States to spread its Political and military presence in the energy

rich Central Asia. US also wanted to minimize the influence of its Cold war partner Russia (erstwhile USSR) in the region.

In brief, for the first ten years of independence of Central Asia, the United States saw its interests in the region as limited as the region was remote, landlocked, and of little strategic consequence. Although Central Asia's energy resources and proximity to Russia, Iran, and China required some U.S. attention, and the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) infrastructure remaining after the Soviet Union's breakup made for an even more compelling concern, the region was far from critical to the United States. But after 9/11 incidence, Central Asia suddenly became valuable real estate to the United States as it decided how to deploy and maintain forces in Central Asia for Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan. From Central Asian perspectives, U.S. policy was sometimes confusing, sometimes disappointing, but about as much as could rationally be expected.⁹ Uzbek President Islam Karimov's foreign policy was to some extent remained pro-US. United States along with Uzbekistan provided Kyrgyzstan military support in the wake of IMU incursions into that country in 1999 and 2000.

Central Asian Independence, Fragile Peace and United States

The Central Asian states since their independence indulged in various socio-economic, political and security problems. Civil war in Tajikistan (1992-97) devastated the state; Uzbekistan witnessed the struggle between IMU, an extremist radical and violent organization, and Islam Karimov, the president. The rise of IMU's terrorism and Karimov's oppressive and iron hand approach further led the state insecure. The growing dependence on United States and Russia for Security, perpetual threat from extremist and internal ethnic conflicts made central Asia a boiling pot. His partnership with the West and Russia to tackle the problem of terrorism was an alarming factor for the extremists. Extremist did not lag behind; they made alliance with Al Qaida and Taliban in Afghanistan and fought against coalition forces and are fighting till date. The question here arises that, whether the withdrawal of coalition forces from Afghanistan will give an opportunity to IMU to return home and act against Karimov which is in power since independence? Will Karimov handle it at unilateral level? Or will Uzbekistan become a zone of peace? The answer of these questions is uncertain and will depend upon US withdrawal. However, IMU is planning to attack Uzbekistan and analyst says that the movement could become more active in the next year.

First Decade: Independence and Emergence of Trans-national Extremist Organizations

After 75 years of Soviet ascendancy, Central Asia finally got independence in late 1991 without choice. The undemanded independence left Central Asia without an efficient leadership. The leader of all the countries pledged to make reform and adopt secularism, but reality is different. Democracy never established in these newly independent states. The rulers of all the republics started tightening their grip over political power. The first decade of independence witnessed the rise of extremist organizations with divergent agendas and response of the rulers in Central Asia. Fergana Valley the most populous city of central Asia became the arena of extremist. It was divided by Joseph Stalin of former USSR between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The Central Asian states witnessed the rise of various extremist organisations many of which have split or joined up with one another. The most significant players in the region's militant landscape include:

Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). It was founded in June 1990 in Astrakhan (Russia) and was the first Islamist political party to gain Soviet recognition. After it was banned throughout Central Asia in 1992, many of its members resorted to violence.

Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). The Tajik branch of the IRP, the IRPT was active during the Tajik civil war of 1992-97 but has since turned to the political sphere.

United Tajik Opposition (UTO). UTO was an umbrella organization for the groups that fought against the Moscow-backed Tajik government during the Tajik civil war (1992-97) but most of its members turned to politics at the end of the war in 1997 through a Peace Accord. UTO derived much of its strength from Islamist groups like the IRP, but it also encompassed the Democratic Party of Tajikistan and the ethnic Gharmi group.

Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT). The most popular Islamic movement across Central Asia is the Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami, popularly known as Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT), or the Party of Islamic Liberation. Hizb-ut-Tahrir was founded in 1952 in Saudi Arabia and Jordan by diaspora Palestinians, notably by Taki-a-Din Nabkhani Filastyni. It reached in Central Asia in 1990's and spreaded like wild fire in central Asia and though it is not violent but thousands of its supporter are in jails.¹⁰ The group is present in more than 40 countries; its Central Asian base is Uzbekistan. The group promotes ideological extremism, though it does not directly engage in violence. Even so, the region's security forces have targeted it.

Adolat (Justice). The clandestine members of Uzbekistan's IRP founded Adolat and demanded an Islamic revolution. Its glaring founders include Tahir Yuldeshev, a University dropout and a fine orator and Juma Namangani, a resident of Namangan area of Fergana Valley.¹¹ After the ban from govt in March, 1992, its leader fled to Tajikistan and later in 1998 formed a new violent, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). A militant Islamic group, an extension of Adolat, aligned with al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban. IMU was formed in 1998 in Kabul by Juma Namangani after the UTO turned to politics. Its ultimate aim was to transform Uzbekistan into an Islamic state. IMU leaders since have spread to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Islamic Jihad Union (IJU). The IJU split off from IMU; it has a small presence in Europe.

Movement for the Islamic Revival of Uzbekistan (MIRU). MIRU was formed in 1994 and was incorporated into the IMU in 1998.

East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). A group primarily focused on independence for the north western Chinese region of Xinjiang, ETIM is thought to have ties with the IMU.

Islamic Movement of Turkistan (IMT). Like ETIM, IMT is thought to have ties with the IMU.¹²

The end of first decade led to the emergence of 9/11 and retaliation of the United States. The Central Asian extremist organizations particularly, IMU suffered in the US led campaign against Terrorism. IMU was also declared by United States as a global terrorist organization.

Second Decade: 9/11, Security Challenges and Central Asian Response.

The emergence of second decade altered the security scenario of Central Asia. For the first time, the Western forces appeared in Central Asia with the prospects of cooperation from Central Asian regimes to fight against terrorism. This further created chaos and made Central Asia what is called by Zbigniew Brzezinski 'a zone of instability'. Until the war in Afghanistan started, human rights organizations and U.S. government officials had openly and harshly criticized the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan for its extensive human rights abuses but 9/11 episode silenced the critics as the US required support from Central Asian regimes.¹³

To wage its war on al Qaeda and the Taliban, the United States has wished the support of Uzbekistan and its dictator, Islam Karimov. Uzbekistan has the best transport facilities, air bases

and military capabilities in the region, has allowed the United States to station troops, airplanes, and helicopters at an Uzbek air base and to use Uzbek territory to launch offensive strikes on Afghanistan. Karimov provided Karshi-Khanabad air base to the coalition forces. The United States, in return, promptly inserted into the emergency appropriations bill passed by Congress in September 2001 a \$25 million grant to Uzbekistan for weapons and other military purchases. Then, in January, Washington announced that Uzbekistan will receive \$100 million of the \$4 billion Congress has allocated for fighting terrorism.¹⁴ It was not only Uzbekistan that got assistance from US but others also. Lynn Pascoe, former U.S. Ambassador to Malaysia wrote that, “Our assistance budgets for most of the countries have increased significantly. The states of Central Asia have been excellent partners in the war against terrorism and they have welcomed our contribution to their security”.¹⁵ United States after the announcement of withdrawal of forces tries to decrease the aid to central Asian states.

In summer 2011, another extremist organization called Jund-al-Khilafa take birth and was founded by three Kazakhs. For Jund- al-Khilafa, attacking American troops in Afghanistan was very much its “right of passage” to enter the community of militant Groups later it joined Al Qaida in Pakistan’s tribal areas.

Third Decade: Post 2014 and Future prospects of Central Asia.

The biggest modification in central Asian region in this decade is the withdrawal of coalition forces and vacation of military bases from Central Asia. It is uncertain whether the bases will further be used by US for her personal benefit or not. Since independence, security remains priority for the Central Asian states. Karimov during the second decade remained a close, what we may say ‘Personal friend’ of United States. After the withdrawal of coalition forces the geopolitics of this heartland will put a question mark on security. To solve this issue Uzbek president is shaking hands with Russia. Karimov said, “The prospect of allied forces leaving Afghanistan makes the situation unpredictable, so we need consultations on these issues . . . The consequences of the expansion of terrorism, extremism, and religious radicalism could be far worse than open war”.¹⁶ If any future non state raid took place in Central Asia, it may be in Uzbekistan because IMU is preparing to excel in Uzbekistan and their goal is still same as was in 1998. According to BBC reporter, “IMU still wants to overthrow the Uzbek government”.¹⁷ The leaders of Central Asian states for future prospects of security needs to create their own regional security cooperation organization with multiple agendas like, border disputes, ethnic violence,

water sharing issues, migration issues. Central Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (CAARC) can be an option for them for future perpetual cooperation of being a landlocked region. Such types of organizations can be proved to be a boon for future prosperity and stability of the region. It does not mean that Central Asia quit from CSTO, ECO, SCO or any else. But they should have their own organization to make better relations, solve territorial disputes, solve ethnic conflicts etc. The Russian, Chinese or European dominated organizations have their own interest rather than the interest of Central Asia.

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