

The new Great Game in Central Asia: Challenges and Opportunities for Pakistan

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Introduction

The term New Great Game describes the complex cobweb of rivalries, competition, and chessboard game being played out in Central Asian contemporary times. It is reminiscent of the Old Great Game. However, the players are no longer confined to British and Russian Empires, the canvass has become much larger. It involves major global players: China, Russia and the US; regional players: Turkey, Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan as well as global multinational companies. All these players are vying for influence to promote their geopolitical, security and economic interests in the region. The role of Afghanistan and the area that constitutes today's Pakistan, as in the old Great Game, has central position in the emerging scenarios. Reasons for the renewed focus on Central Asia are: i) geostrategic value of Central Asia as it is located at the centre of the Eurasian mass; and ii) because of its huge natural resources, it has implications for the world. Pakistan's proximity to Central Asia which has the potential to become a hub of economic activity, pipelines and corridors as well as cross cultural interactions places it in a unique position. As a conduit providing connections to south, central and west Asia and the Arabian Sea, Pakistan is at a crucial juncture. Wise policy decisions would enable Pakistan to overcome the challenges and exploit the opportunities.

Central Asia in the 21st Century

In the context of the New Great Game, Central Asia is seen as an end in itself rather than a means to an end. This approach gives emphasis to the intrinsic and inherent value of Central Asia and its importance not as a spring board for access to India as in the Old Great Game. In the current scenario the region's enormous economic potential, has likened

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Central Asia to the Middle East of the 1920s. The five states of Central Asia, Azerbaijan and the energy-rich Caspian Sea have huge energy resources. Gas reserves alone are estimated at 46% of the world. In addition, the region enjoys geo-strategic location which gives it added significance. Given near universal literacy rate and emerging consumer market, potential for investment, trade and construction is enormous. Once Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and One Belt One Road (OBOR) are linked through road and railway networks, European and Asian regions will be completely connected reviving the old Silk Route.

Strategically Central Asia is located at the cross roads of Asia, Europe, Persian Gulf, the Middle East and the Far East. It is surrounded by some of the fastest growing economies of the world: China, India and Russia. With Obama Administration's "pivot to Asia" redefined as "rebalancing strategy", dissuasion and deterrence of "emerging threats" remain central to the US strategic policy towards Asia. China's attempts to diversify its core economic interests and Russia's own strategic thought, organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, BRICS Bank and other initiatives assume special significance. In this connection China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) would serve multiple communication and infrastructure purposes in the region. China has emphasized that these projects are win-win for all in the region and will be game changer where everyone will benefit, as it is an essential component of the wider OBOR strategy.

The vital role of energy reserves of Central Asia in the development and economic growth of various regions has drawn focused attention of the international multinational companies. However, with the Russian and Chinese state enterprises' engagement Central Asian states' dependence on international financial institutions and companies has been reduced to some extent. Energy is one important factor which is why interests of Russia, China and the US converge and diverge in the region. The huge oil and gas reserves as well as wealth of minerals in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan have encouraged visions of converting Central Asia into an energy hub, with pipelines going in all directions: west, south and east. Since China's hunger for energy is

insatiable, Beijing's plans include energy supplies from Central Asia. In addition to big investments, China has extended \$10 billion to Kazakhstan, \$4 billion to Turkmenistan and over \$630 million to Tajikistan for infrastructure development in general.

In terms of religious extremism and terrorism, after 9/11 there has been a continuing concern about the activities of such groups as al-Qaeda, Taliban and affiliated groups, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and other Uighur elements. As some of these groups had taken refuge in Afghanistan and the Pakistan' Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) region, their activities posed serious challenge to the stability of the region as a whole. While US and ISAF (even though now with reduced presence) are involved in counter-insurgency operations and training of Afghan National Army and Police, China has made combating the Three Evils (Separatism, Extremism and Terrorism) as one of the pillars of SCO. Developments in Afghanistan and the so-called border lands of Pakistan and Afghanistan are vitally important for the stability, peace and security of the region. Both these countries are crucial in the realization of the vision of Central Asia as energy hub.

Afghanistan an Important Piece on the Chessboard

In the old Great Game Afghanistan was an uncertain piece on the chessboard between the British and Russian empires. Both these powers checked each other in Afghanistan, which was accepted as a buffer in the Anglo-Russian Treaty of 1907. Afghanistan was a transit area then as Russians struggled for access to the warm waters and to India. It is even so today from the point of transit from Central Asia so as to unlock trade and investment opportunities, pipeline and communication entrepreneurship. Checkmating Russia at the Oxus River and on the other side of the Pamirs, British Empire maneuvered strategies and tactical measures to manage Afghanistan. Russia's road and railway networks were stalemated at Herat. British Empire's railways linked FATA and Balochistan on the western side to the western borders. The centre of gravity was Afghanistan then and is even today. The Heart of Asia institution co-chaired by Afghanistan and Pakistan amplifies this phenomenon.

Pakistan: Stability in the Border Land

During the old Great Game FATA and Balochistan enjoyed strategic position in containing Russia in Afghanistan and Persia. The tribes of FATA played an important role in the unfolding of British strategies in Afghanistan. The special status given to FATA at that time and the FCR remain in place even today. The role of the political agent and the concept of collective punishment have outlived their utility. FATA is an important theatre in Pakistan state's war against terrorism and militancy. FATA's crucial part in the resistance against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan changed the dynamics of the region. The internal fabric has been fractured, pressures exerted by the influx of terrorist elements has brought untold misery to the population of the agencies. The issues of state control and rule of law acquired a serious dimension in the aftermath of 9/11 with continued instability, insurgency and fighting in Afghanistan. While Pakistan has embarked on crushing the disruptive elements, the intertwining nature of terrorism between Pakistan and Afghanistan has prevented both these countries from exploiting their geo-strategic location. The understanding between the two on joint efforts in eradicating the menace and the reconciliation process gives reason for cautious optimism.

The project of CPEC has unlocked opportunities for Pakistan. With an investment of \$46 billion, China has opened avenues in multiple sectors. The energy crisis that was sapping resources and depriving the country of industrial, agriculture and economic growth has been accorded due priority. North-south and east-west infrastructure development and the accompanying projects would link Pakistan with the neighbouring regions. Through Kashgar, Pakistan will have access to Central Asia and through Gwadar port China will have access to the Middle East and Africa. As and when these initiatives will materialize they will bring prosperity, development and growth to Pakistan as well as to Afghanistan. Therefore, it is in the absolute interest of both these countries to provide space for economic activity by promoting stability, security and peace in the region.

Challenges

- The biggest challenge emanates from mistrust between Afghanistan and Pakistan which breeds ill-feelings and blame game for any terrorist activity on either side of the border;
- Attempts to bridge this gap have resulted in mixed responses ranging from spirit of cooperation to severance of contacts on security matters. The question is how this process can be made sustainable and how a common understanding of terrorism related issues can be developed between the two countries;
- The unlocking of the region and all other prospects related to economic vibrancy, peace and security have prime importance, both for Afghanistan and Pakistan's FATA and Balochistan especially;
- Consensus and ownership of various projects and visionary approach by local communities is vital. For that it needs to be ensured that people relate to broad framework of development with the engagement of outside friends;
- A system or mechanism could be evolved to make the process more inclusive, transparent and participatory. All concerned must see that they have vital stakes in the initiatives launched for infrastructure development and economic growth;
- Implementation and timely completion of projects undertaken especially under CPEC will be the litmus test of commitments of all sides and results will speak for themselves in the eyes of the public;
- Since interests of major powers are involved in this region, Pakistan's policy must ensure that these powers have a collective stake in peace, prosperity and development of Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Opportunities

- Central Asia's geographic proximity to Pakistan presents enormous opportunities for both. Energy resources can serve as engine of growth for Pakistan and Afghanistan thereby strengthening peace within these countries;

- TAPI serves as a good example. Once completed the project will link Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India through gas pipeline bringing royalties and revenues to the transit countries;
- Hydropower potential of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is a valuable source for electricity for Afghanistan and Pakistan that are energy deficient. Projects like CASA-1000 can help in invigorating industrial activity and support for agricultural production. At some stage in the future, an electricity network could be developed for sharing, pooling, trading and transmission of electricity region-wide;
- Ports in Turkmenbashi (Turkmenistan) and Gwadar (Pakistan) will play a crucial role in shaping international trade. Gwadar would not only be a hub for shipment of natural resources from Central Asia but would also promote other trade activities. Gwadar port's facilities such as ware-housing, trans-shipment, transit coastal trade and provision of commercial and industrial facilities will allow intense trade and investment activity in the region;
- These and other emerging opportunities will transform the economic and political profile of Pakistan. However, there is a dire need to prepare the country's manpower keeping in view the future projections of highly skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manpower for a range of activities,
- Business community needs to be sensitized and entrepreneurs trained so that they are able to cope with the demands of the future scenario;
- Public sector as a whole need to be oriented towards international standards as more involvement of international business interest groups can be foreseen in the coming years. As and when the region will vastly open up, there will be demand for efficient, innovative and creative manpower.

Conclusion

Pakistan is at the cusp of rapid transformation with the country graduating from the current level of development to a higher level. Keeping in view the divergence of objectives of major powers: China, Russia and the US, diplomatic and political challenges will be intense.

This will be particularly true in the context of Central Asia. The new Great Game is a see-saw among the major and regional players.

China seems to have emerged as a dominant player with subtle and discreet policy initiatives. The US did make rapid gains in Central Asia especially after 9/11 securing bases and establishing military links, but China and Russia's diplomatic, political and economic overtures seem to have gained more influence in Central Asia. AIIB, BRICS Bank, SCO and other similar approaches have provided alternative institutional mechanisms. However, the jigsaw puzzle is Afghanistan as in the old Great Game. The conditions in the 21st Century are very different from the 19th and early 20th Centuries. The stumbling blocks will be left out of the development frame with the possibility of them drifting into irrelevancy.

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