

## Chapter 2. Analysis of Geopolitical Settings of Central Asian States in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Engagement of Regional and International Contestants

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### Introduction

Twentieth-century witnessed some of the significant geopolitical events of all time. Soviet disintegration in 1991 was also one such important event that changed the face of Eurasia and created a stage for geopolitical processes and rivalries. The core of geopolitics lies in the geography of the region and how it controls and shapes the available choices to states. As a consequence eventually these choices are reflected in politics, history and culture of the region demonstrating the influence of geography (Wimbush 2020). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia a geographically closed and highly inaccessible part of Eurasia yet again started to form a worthy place in the continents's heart whose importance can be attributed to its strategic location in close proximity of strategic players.

The five Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan—are geographically situated in West of China, east of the Caspian Sea, South of Russia, and north of Iran and Afghanistan, this region surrounded by deserts, high mountains, massive water bodies, and steppe valleys has a continental type of climate (Singh 2018). A region that was once at the backwaters has been

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gaining the world leader's attention in forming geopolitical strategies. Geopolitics, which was based on ideology at the time of the Cold War, shifted its focus to resource control; regions possessing any kind of energy reserves were on target of geopolitical strategists. Central Asia is endowed with various key natural reserves such as oil, natural gas, coal, uranium, hydroelectric power, copper, gold, and aluminium with a vast potential to be exploited. Turkmenistan has the world's 4<sup>th</sup> largest natural gas deposits (British Petroleum 2014), and Kazakhstan is the leading producer of uranium in the world producing 43% of the total global supply in 2019 (World Nuclear Association 2021). Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are blessed with huge hydropower potential, and Tajikistan alone holds 4% of the world's hydro potential, and Uzbekistan not only has substantial natural gas reserves but also more than 1800 known mineral deposits, it has unexploited resources of uranium, gold, nitrogen, sulphur and, iodine (Lopour 2015).

From a historical and geographical perspective, the region's location and rich mineral resources had attracted many outside powers and at one point of time, this region was the "focal point" for different competing civilizations. Owing to this region's central location, it can be precisely called a zone of convergence of the significant geo-cultural regions of Eurasia bridging both continents. This region was an integral part of the *Ancient Silk Route* facilitating intercontinental movement, thus in the past host of Geopolitical thinkers such as Mackinder, Mahan, Brzezinski elucidated the importance of the region into the following framework: trade routes, the bridge between Europe and Asia, a middle way to the Indian Ocean, resources and goods of high demand (Asopa 2001; Singh 2018). The Breakdown of the Soviet Union made these newly independent energy-rich Central Asian states strategically "central" for regional and international players. Being Russia's 'near abroad', Central Asia is crucial for Moscow; however, with the changing geopolitical equations Iran, United States, Turkey, China, India, and European Union has shown great interest in this region for different reasons, and energy is undoubtedly one of the most important one (Singh 2018). Each one of them seeks prospective benefits in the energy sector from energy pro-

curement to energy distribution to energy consumption.

It is precisely this struggle for energy resources and the political and economic vacuum produced after disintegration created the basis for great power rivalry. A new great game was predicted to define rivalry between key players to control vital energy resources and fill up the power vacuum (Kleveman 2003). The original Great Game had only two big players, the empires of Russia and Britain. Today there are many more players, both outside and inside Central Asia. The region is caught in a complex web of power-game flanked by neighbouring countries and a distant superpower (USA) seeking, if not dominance at least influence. The following section provides an overview of the institutional frameworks and energy policy of key players engaged in Central Asian geopolitics.

### **Russian involvement in Central Asia**

Russia, which once considered Central Asia as its own ‘backyard’, upon realizing its loosening influence over the Central Asian region, started to look for an alternative policy to counter its disengagement in the region (Jonson 2001: 95). On 6 May 2000, when Vladimir Putin was elected as president of Russia his policies were very clear regarding Central Asian states. He advocated more aggressive foreign policy and considered Central Asia as an “*absolute priority*”. The foreign policy documents released during his different tenures as president in 2000, 2008, and in 2013 put the maximum priority on CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), and discussed stability, economic, security cooperation, and the importance to support the ethnocultural needs of ethnic Russians living in the “Near Abroad” (Patnaik 2016).

There has been a new ‘economically driven paradigm’ with the start of Putin’s era, stated Ezeli Azarkan. He also says that closer military ties of Russia-Central Asian states also helped Russia to secure investment in Central Asia. Kazakhstan sends most of its oil through the CPC pipeline carrying Tengiz oil to the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiysk. In 2004, Russia pledged \$2 billion in hydropower projects and in modernizing the Tajikistan Aluminium plant—TadAz. Tajik foreign minister

Hamrokhon Zarifi stated in 2007, “*Russia was, is, and will remain our strategic partner and ally. We have commitments to each other, and, on our part, we will strictly fulfil them*” (Azarkan 2009).

Russia also views itself as a principal actor with special rights and obligations, acting as an economic and political centre of significance in Eurasia and particularly in the Central Asian States. The foreign policy document gave an idea about Russia’s priorities in the post-Soviet space after a decade of neglect and irrelevance in the 1990s. Russia used multi-lateral regional initiatives to strengthen its influence in the region; CIS, CSTO and EEC were a few of the earliest initiatives to sustain economic and security integration between the majority of former Soviet republics (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012). To make this integration deeper, involvement in all major regional initiatives was imperative at each step. From Eurasian Economic Community (EURASEC) to Custom Union (CU) to Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the deep engagement in these organizations elevated Russia as an attractive partner for many CIS states (Patnaik 2016). These regional initiatives, which were established with key objectives of managing unified customs tariff and non-tariff regulation measures, free trade regime, opening a common market for transportation services, were successful in developing cordial multilateral and bilateral relations not only economically but also socially. Initiating institutional frameworks such as CU, EURASEC and EEC have acted as motivation force for member states expecting faster and enhanced economic development for the region (ibid).

Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) which was launched in 2000, became the cornerstone of Putin’s economic strategy for Central Asia, he invested heavily in the Eurasian integration project as a means to make Russia a great power again. By integrating Eurasia economically and politically Putin envisioned, that this region would serve as one of the world’s geopolitical “poles”, and a link connecting Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. He released several policy documents which stressed the importance of integration. In this regard, Russian President Vladimir Putin states, “*By building the Custom Union and Common Economic Space. We are laying the foundation for a prospective Eurasian Economic*

*Union. At the same time, the Custom Union and CES will expand by involving Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. We plan to go beyond that, and set ourselves an ambitious goal of reaching a higher level of integration- a Eur-asian Union. We suggest a powerful supranational association capable of becoming one of the poles in the modern world and serving as an efficient bridge between Europe and the dynamic Asia-Pacific region” (Patnaik 2016: 100).*

Many Central Asian states have accepted that Russian presence in Central Asia is beneficial for their regional security and stability and believe that Russian presence would take care of their particular and shared security needs. In Contrast, Western military presence is majorly governed by their unilateral interest. Though this has not made them transform their multi-vector policy of engaging with the world’s multiple powers, Russia remains the primary vector for most Central Asian states. Russian efforts have also been fruitful in the region, as Central Asia’s authoritarian regimes feel that the United States forced democratization fuelled rebellious impulse thus, promote “revolutions” to replace them. However, in recent years, Russian influence has weakened due to declining oil and gas prices and the self-inflicted diplomatic and strategic cost of its interventions in Ukraine, Crimea and Syria (Clarke 2020).

### **Chinese strategies for Central Asia**

Apart from fighting terrorism, separatism and radicalism, China’s strategic objective in Central Asia is mainly to expand its economic interest (Lukin 2007). Central Asian states also realized that economic cooperation with China could be profitable economically as it would link their economies with the Asia-Pacific economic boom (Jiali 1999). While Central Asia offers natural resources, China has a market, technology and capital to invest, thereby making it a mutually complimentary relationship (Patnaik 2016).

Exponential growth in domestic energy demand, to reduce dependency on the Strait of Malacca, conflicts in the Middle East, and insecurity of physical interruption in oil supplies were some of the reasons which pushed the Chinese to seek varied energy supply channels. Given

the Caspian Basin's unexploited reserves, geographical proximity and stable situation, the region drew Chinese investment in the energy sector, especially of Central Asian energy reserves. This drew China into competition with the United States, Russia and other players in the game. Julia Nanay, Senior Director in PFC Energy, indicated in the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission that everything was oriented from South to North before the breakup of the Soviet Union. Everything went to Russia, which created a monopoly on the energy sector in Central Asian countries and it is the Chinese that has provided them with optionality. About Chinese engagement she noted, China strengthens its energy. Thus, the energy partnership between China and Central Asia not only satisfies Central Asia's desire to diversify energy export partners but also meets China's stated interest in diversifying its suppliers and finding alternative energy routes (Nanay, US-China Economic and Security Review Commission 2009).

The journey of energy diplomacy in Central Asia began in Kazakhstan with a Chinese stake of 35 percent in Buzachi oil field in 2003 and the acquisition of Canada-based company PetroKazakhstan for \$4.1 billion in 2005 by CNPC (China National Petroleum Corporation). Another major acquisition was of Mangistau Munaygas. There were colossal financing and foreign direct investment in energy resource extraction and infrastructure development to support the oil and natural gas transport. There was a significant investment in the communication, energy and transport sector of Uzbekistan, the construction of new roads and tunnels in Tajikistan and the expansion of road connection between Kyrgyzstan and China. With this began the flooding of cheap Chinese consumer goods in local markets of these countries (Kaser 1997). In 2006 Turkmenistan started building the Turkmenistan-Kazakhstan-China pipeline, linking China directly to overcome investment constraints (Gidadhubli 2015). By 2012 with foreign direct investment of \$46 billion with the region's five states, China became the most important investment source, "*Colossal 21<sup>st</sup> Century Pipeline Project*", the latest project focuses on linking Turkmenistan and China meant to include three pipeline routes that transit Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajiki-

stan (ibid). Since 2015 China has emerged as a leading destination for gas export with 50 billion cubic metres (bcm), exceeding Turkmen gas export to Russia and Iran. With the announcement of its new \$16.3 billion Silk Road plan in November 2014, China has again demonstrated its vast economic interest in Central Asia (ibid).

For deeper involvement, China and Russia introduced institutional framework Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001 to maintain their influence in the region and facilitate negotiations among China, Russia and Central Asian Republics (Rauf 2017). In the last two decades, SCO has evolved as a multilateral, multifaceted organization and has developed itself as a significant Chinese geostrategic policy tool in the region. China has used this multilateral forum to increase its economic, social, military and political presence in the region and contain the influence of external powers in the region (Scobel et al. 2014). Thus, raising the position of China in the region SCO has provided it with an assertive voice in Central Asian affairs without alienating Russia and worrying regional leaders while the side-lining United States. In 2013 China came up Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which focus on larger economic inter-connectivity through the advancement of critical infrastructure such as oil and gas pipelines, highways, railways and telecommunication networks (Clarke 2020). Some scholars argue that- BRI is set up to mitigate the risks emanating from China's geopolitical stir, caused due to establishing overland infrastructure and aggressive economic policies across the continent to connect with Central Asia, Russia, South Asia and Europe (ibid). In recent years to change its image for people of the region, China has pursued a direct strategy to field its soft power in the Central Asian region, using tools such as cultural exchanges, environmental cooperation, education and trade, valuing their beliefs, customs and traditions and developing close relations with the local population. Thus in the current geopolitical scenario, Central Asia is a significant territory for China, particularly for its energy reserves and as a critical route for its Belt and Road initiative to expand in Europe.

### **American interest in Central Asia**

It was not a simple coincidence that the discovery of Caspian energy reserves in the mid-1990s was followed by the eastward expansion of NATO in 1999. Since then, the United States working to strengthen its “New Central Asia Strategy” which aims to consolidate its status as the sole superpower, containment of Russia in North and China in the East and check Islamic fundamentalism in the South (Jaili 1999). American scholars such as Huntington and Brzezinski mentioned the need for the United States Primacy to maintain a new world order and the vital importance of Eurasia to fulfil this objective (Patnaik 2016). *Silk Road* and *Greater Central Asia* (GCA) were some strategies that were adopted by the American geostrategic to pull Central Asia away from Russia and keep alive the hopes of US supremacy in the Eurasian Heartland. The Silk Road Strategy Act of 1999 was one step further to trasport the Central Asian region’s natural resources to the international market (Purtas 2008). Apart from economic benefits, this act helped Central Asia and the Caucasus prevent regional conflicts, promote democracy, border control, and create civil society. Frederick Starr, an American expert on Russian affairs, suggested a partnership between the United States and GCA which would help to develop these states as more secular, sovereign and market-oriented countries. And a US-GCA partnership world creates a geopolitical balance against Russia and China’s influence (Starr 2005).

During the American campaign in Afghanistan, on the one hand, the U.S. projected its role of strengthening counterterrorism struggles in cooperation with Central Asian states and to help them expand to expand their energy supply routes, promote free market, human rights, and combat drug trafficking. On the other hand, it tried to alienate Central Asia from Russia and China (Nichol 2014). And to attain these objectives, Energy was the primary tool to achieve the larger objective of influencing the *Eurasian Heartland* through the pivotal non-Russian states. The policy of using energy diplomacy to promote strategic goals in CIS began with the decision to construct a BTC Pipeline. In order to deny Russia the benefits it inherited from the Soviet pipeline infrastruc-



ture, the American strategy was to build different pipelines. For this purpose, US supported the Southern corridor of Caspian Gas export routes transiting Turkey to Europe and for that matter, it invested in the BTC pipeline and South Caucasus pipeline. At US-European Union Energy Council at Brussels in 2012, the Southern Gas Corridor's importance was highlighted, emphasizing the corridor as a pivotal opportunity to diversify supplies and allow new providers i.e., Central Asian State to participate in the EU energy markets (ibid).

Central Asian countries supported the operation “Enduring Freedom” in Afghanistan by offering the “Northern Distribution Network” (NDN) proposed for the transport of armed equipment as well as troops for the Afghan war front (Dunn 2012). The NDN act as an instrument of the United States to recognize its “New Silk Road” vision. In order to remain positioned on the strategic play board of Central Asia, it becomes imperative for the West to keep its position intact in the scenario. With this, Former Assistant Secretary of United States Robert Blake, claimed in October 2011 that “the NDN route could serve as a component of the United States Silk Road Vision after NATO’s withdrawal from Afghanistan”. This route has presumed larger importance for the Western powers in the current years, providing material aid, investment, and infrastructural growth (Patnaik 2016). However, the last two administrations paid lesser weightage to Central Asia due to the orientation towards Indo-Pacific. Recently in 2020, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo went to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for a diplomatic visit and at the same time US government announced the “United States Strategy for Central Asia: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity”. The strategy states that “Central Asia is a geostrategically vital region for the national security interest of the United States, regardless of the levels of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan” emphasizing again the importance of the region in its foreign policy (Tolipov 2020).

### **Indian aspirations for Central Asia**

Indian interest in Central Asia is driven by its concern of diversifying its energy sources and develop India’s soft power in the region by

addressing humanitarian crises. India's political, cultural, and historical ties to Central Asia date back to antiquity. But current circumstances, namely the quest for energy and the threat of terrorism, have instructed a new urgency, adding strategic realities to historical tradition. Regardless of the rich cultural linkages of the past with Central Asia, Indian relations with Central Asia were not much enthusiastic in the 1990s (Patnaik 2004). In 2002, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee spoke about the need to figure a new silk route of friendship and cooperation between India and Central Asia (Dwivedi 2017). The first significant move was in November 2003, when a visit by the Indian prime minister was prepared, and an action to renovate and upgrade the Ayni airbase was initiated in Tajikistan. The first important energy initiative in the region was in August 2005, when Indian state-owned company ONGC (Oil and Natural Gas Corporation) combined with Mittal Industrial Group to form the OMEL (ONGC Mittal Energy Limited) to acquire energy assets in Kazakhstan. OMEL was created to boost up Indian global energy search to diversify its energy import routes as Mittal earlier acquired Russian company Lukoil's assets in Kazakhstan, which could be an influential factor in favoring Indian efforts in overseas energy deals. One of the significant achievements of OMEL in this field was that it acquired a 25 percent stake in the Satpayev oil block in Caspian (Patnaik 2016).

To build stronger political relations and strengthen strategic and security cooperation with Central Asian states, India launched the 'Connect Central Asia' policy in 2012. This policy aimed to magnify Indian relations with Central Asia beyond traditional spheres of energy and economics, based on pro-active political and people-to-people engagement with Central Asian Republics. This policy promised a cross-regional energy infrastructure, new flight connections with Central Asia improving air connectivity to promote trade and tourism and focused on promoting cooperation in banking, medicine, information technology, education, pharmaceutical industries, and most importantly energy to strengthen economic links (Campbell 2013). Another crucial initiative coordinated by Asian Development Bank in 2011 is the TAPI (Turk-

menistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) pipeline for a cost of \$7.6 billion. This 1680 km long pipeline would supply Turkmen gas to three partner states (ADB 2012; Abdurasulov 2015). Though construction of the pipeline has not been initiated yet due to the various reasons such as security risks associated with the pipeline which will pass militancy prone areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan, apart from prior commitments of Turkmen gas reserves to Russia and the complications of engaging with the regime in Ashgabet (Gogoi 2016).

Arvind Gupta, an eminent Indian strategic thinker, suggests that India must amend its approach to Central Asia and display greater proactivity. India's trade with Central Asia is around \$700 million much lower than China which is \$46 billion. India's import from Central Asia is close to only 1% of the region's total export, and the share in countries import is less than 1.5 percent, China on the other hand, is emerging as the largest trading partner of Central Asia (Dwivedi 2017). Thus, India requires dealing with Central Asia at bilateral and at the collective level. Security is also an important aspect of the India-Central Asia relationship. India, through various efforts, is trying to showcase its geopolitical and geo-economic presence in the region. In 2016, an agreement was signed between India and Tajikistan on terror financing and money laundering, and a joint exercise was conducted between Indian and Kazakh armies to strengthen bilateral army-army connections and exchange of information and skills. Central Asia is one of the largest beneficiaries of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program (Patnaik 2016). Although India-Central Asia relation has been flourishing because of the significant efforts and investments in the region, there are issues related to energy transport, stagnation in Project TAPI etc. that need to be settled. India can play a constructive role in Central Asia. However, its participation is restricted due to the involvement of major powers comprising the United States, Russia, and China in the region.

### **Role Turkey in Central Asia**

Energy transit routes play a critical role in shaping any country's for-

eign policy because these routes deliver political and economic leverage to that country. Due to its geostrategic location, Turkey acts as a transit route for several pipelines of different states, and thus pipeline politics plays a decisive role in shaping its foreign policy (Mesbahi 2010). In the initial years, Turkey emerged as an active regional player for Central Asia because of its favourable geographic location connecting producers and consumers of East and West, as it had historical, religious, cultural and linguistic ties with Central Asian region (Turkey, World Fact Book). The higher economic growth of its economy helped Turkey to increase its investments in Central Asian countries, especially in light industries, transport, and tourism via multiple joint ventures. According to an official Turkish source, the trade volume between Central Asian countries and Turkey rose to \$3 billion in 2007, and more than 1000 Turkish companies invested and opened up in Central Asia. By this time, Turkish investment in Kazakhstan was \$7.5 billion and in Turkmenistan \$8.5 billion (Mesbahi 2010). According to the latest report published by Directorate-General for Trade, European Commission, in 2016, Turkey was among the top trading partners of Central Asia with 5<sup>th</sup> rank and 5.2% of overall trade. Its total export for the region is 6.3% of the total trade with 4<sup>th</sup> rank and total import from the region are 4.4% of the total trade.

However, despite the robust trade, cultural and economic ties in the region, Turkey does not play an influential role in Central Asia because in the last decade, there was a significant shift in the orientation of foreign policy of Turkey becoming more critical to NATO and US policies in the region. The transformation of Turkey from a secular country to a moderate Islamic state in recent years complicated its policies in Eurasia, as Secular Central Asian states are quite apprehensive of Islamic influence from outside that could destabilize the region. Thus, playing an Islamic card in Central Asia would not boost Turkey's soft power in the region and the perception that Turkey is sympathetically inclined towards some radical opposition in Syria is not going to promote its cause in the Central Asian region (Patnaik 2016). Turkey's long-term strategy in Central Asia could be to intensify its economic integration

with Central Asia and emerge as a critical player that ensures the energy security of the European countries through diversifying sources of hydrocarbons. In this regard it focuses on uniting the whole Caucasus and Central Asia into a single energy transport system, providing access to Europe through Turkish territory. If harnessed properly, this unique geographic location of Turkey could make Turkey a major terminal bridging Asia and Europe.

### **Iranian engagement in Central Asia**

Iran has several interests in Central Asia, contouring its foreign policy towards the region, from economic integration to cooperation in fields as diverse as security and culture. Keeping this in mind, Iran focused on developing greater economic cooperation with Central Asia within the framework of an expanded Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and bilateral agreements with Central Asian states. The Iranian authority observed improvement in relation and regional cooperation with Central Asian states as a means to reduce its international isolation in the face of continued American hostility, as these freshly independent states provided Iran a vast opportunity for development and engagement in the resource sector (Laruelle & Peyrouse 2012).

A series of bilateral agreements were signed with Turkmenistan in 1994 regarding rail connectivity, freight transport, customs arrangement, and border trade. In the same year, Turkmenistan also agreed to transport its natural gas to the European market via Iran by constructing a pipeline from Kord Kuy (Iran) and Korpeje (Turkmenistan), which became operational in 1997 (Patnaik 2016). A second pipeline, the Dauletabad-Sarakhs-Khangiran pipeline was opened in 2010, which transports Turkmen gas to reach the European market via Iran, thus plummeting dependency of Turkmenistan on Russian pipelines (Wastnidge 2017). Plans for the extensive Turkmen-Iranian-Turkish pipeline collapsed mainly because of the near impossibility of getting international financing for projects in Iran due to continuing U.S. sanctions against that country. Building the smaller pipeline became a way of asserting the importance of the Turkmen-Iranian friendship and eco-

conomic cooperation (Olcott 2003).

Sharing a common bond of ethnocultural and linguistic affinity, Tajikistan and Iran expand their relationship further when Iran mediated in resolving Tajikistan and Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and backed the Tajiks in Afghanistan. Iran invested in the development of Tajikistan's infrastructure and funded Sangtuda hydroelectric power plant, it also financed the construction of the tunnel on the road between Dushanbe and Khujand, the second biggest city of Iran, through the Anzobian Tunnel, which was to be completed by 2006, with this tunnel it was possible to continue road link between Khujand and Dushanbe even in winters (Patnaik 2016). Of all the projects the most ambitious one demanding about 180 million US dollars was to build a highway that will connect Tajikistan with Iran and the Persian Gulf through Afghanistan and would play a significant role in enhancing the cross-border trade of Tajikistan (Nalbandyan 2003). Iran has limited success with multilateral regional organizations like ECO to improve relations with Central Asia. ECO includes all Central Asian Republics, along with Azerbaijan, Pakistan, and Turkey. Although it was with Iran's initiatives that ECO was formed, but its competition with Turkey affected Iran's efforts of economically integrating Central Asia with Iran. To counter each other's influence over the region, both formed different regional grouping such as the Black Sea Common Market formed by Turkey and Caspian Sea Council introduced by Iran (Patnaik 2016).

The most recent figures showcasing Iran and Central Asian trade were published in 2015. Counting the five Central Asian states' economies together, Iran ranked seventh with 1.9 percent of overall trade with the region. Central Asian exports to Iran are only 2.9 percent, on the other hand, imports from Iran are just 1.1 percent. The low figures can be attributed to the dominance of Russia, China, and the European Union in the Central Asian market, and the rest is encroached by Turkey, which accounts for 5.6 percent of overall trade. Another main limitations curbing ECO integration is that these countries are primary producers and commodity exporters, making them more competitive (Wastindge

2017). While looking forward to a positive future, Iran is expecting higher economic integration in the region with the subsequent lifting of the sanctions which was followed by the signing of the 'Iran Nuclear Deal' also called as JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) in 2015 between Iran and P5+1 Countries (IRNA) (Patnaik 2016). The benefits of its re-integration with mainstream economies would help in stimulating further engagements.

## Conclusion

In recent times the geopolitical discourse has emerged again in the academic circle and gained a critical position in states' foreign policy making. This paper focuses on Central Asian geopolitics and explains the importance of the region's geography in shaping its politics. Positioned in the heart of Eurasia, Central Asia's politics is governed by its geostrategic location and energy reserves. The geographical location of these states provides them a unique position, lying at the crossroads of different civilizations like that of Islamic in the south to Russian in north and Chinese in the east to European in the west. Their importance increased manifold since they are endowed with abundant natural resources containing oil, natural gas, hydroelectricity, coal, and uranium. These resources provide them capacity that can fulfil the need of growing powers, thus if harnessed properly, these states have the potential to create a Eurasian hegemon. In this way, Central Asia has acted as a board for the 21<sup>st</sup> century *New Great Game*, and the involvement of so many players has created security challenges for each of them.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the development of energy resources and transit routes in newly independent Central Asian states became a matter of competition for Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, and others. The study focused upon the involvement of major powers and regional players—Russia, China, the U.S., India, Iran, and Turkey in the geopolitics of the Central Asian region to understand the perspective in the broader framework. All the included actors pursue distinct strategies and objectives with varying degrees of activeness in the region. None of the Central Asian states

presently is in the situation to shape this geopolitical course and their future is still dependent upon the interest of these players. However through multi-vector foreign policy and policy of neutrality Central Asian states has been successful to protect their interest and get advantage from all involved players.

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