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Contents

Articles & Contributors	Page
Problems and Prospects of Indian Democracy: An Analysis <i>Deepak Ratti</i>	1
Existential or Cosmic Smart Intelligence <i>Surendra Pal Singh</i>	5
Legal Regime on Climate Change With Specific Reference Renewable Energy Policy <i>Bhupnesh Kumar, Jasmeet Kaur</i>	8
Communalism in India and Communal Riots in India: Projection from since 1984 <i>Shezad Ahmed</i>	15
Tourism and its Commercial Benefits to the Economy of J&K <i>Raja Abdul Wahid Amin (JRF)</i>	20
Play-Based Activities for the Holistic Development of the Children <i>Umendra Singh</i>	28
India as a Factor in China-Pakistan's Enduring Strategic Cooperation <i>Sajad Hussain Wani, Muzaffar Ahmad Ganaie</i>	32
Need for Post-Elementary Urdu Medium Sections for Muslim Girls in Govt. Schools <i>Rajiv Bhatia</i>	38
Role of State Actor in Transnational Security Issues: a Case Study of Nepal and India <i>Bibas Darjee</i>	42
Awareness of Janani Suraksha Yojana as an Instrument for Maternal Health among Women in Rural India <i>Mohd Arif Khan</i>	46
Democratic Instability in Kyrgyzstan: Tulip Revolution and Beyond <i>Suman Sonkar</i>	51
Academic Libraries in the Digital Age <i>Kusum Lata</i>	56
Socio-Legal Aspect of Women's Empowerment <i>D. K. Singh</i>	61
Women Rights, Legislation and Women Empowerment in the post Liberalization Era <i>Samshad Alam</i>	65
Sri Ramakrishna on Brahman, Atman and God: An Overview <i>Hym Sweta Mehrotra</i>	68

Constitutional Rights, various laws and Schemes for Women Empowerment in India <i>Waseem Ahmed, Anas Jameel</i>	178
Central Asia: It's Geo-economic Importance for the World <i>Dr. Md. Mojahid Azam</i>	185
Slum Population In Varanasi City: A Social Study <i>Pankaj Singh</i>	193
Gender Perspectives: A Comparative Analysis of How Men and Women Perceive Cross Gender Issues <i>Shama Akhtar, Heeba Din, Jitendra, Kanti Pawar, Rajul Raikwar</i>	197

CENTRAL ASIA: IT'S GEO-ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE FOR THE WORLD

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ABSTRACT

The Central Asian states are rich in hydrocarbon resources and play an important role in the world politics. The neighbouring countries like China, Iran and Russia can play a vital role in Central Asian Countries. India does not share borders with Central Asia and oil and gas pipelines have to traverse Iran in any future cooperation with this countries. Other than oil and gas, Indo-Iran and Central Asian cooperation will be useful to checkmate Pakistan's anti-India propaganda in the region. Therefore, this article puts forwards the idea that in the new game being played in Central Asia, where the struggle for economic and strategic positioning is rising, India cannot afford to be left out. Iran and Central Asia's importance to India goes beyond the past, touching contemporary security complexity. The relationship has come into a sharp focus of the world politics on account of its geo-political and geo-economic significance.

Keywords: *Central Asia, Hydrocarbon, Iran, India, China, Pakistan, USA, geo-politics, geo-economic, strategic, world politics.*

INTRODUCTION

The breakup of the Soviet Union and the creation of five Central Asian republics have complicated the security relations of the Continent of Asia. But this new struggle is not a repeat of the 19th century, in which the Central Asian states were merely the pawns of their superpower. Instead of, the Central Asian states are now the active players in this power struggle. In their unique geo-strategic position, these states can influence neighbouring countries like Eastern Europe, Russia, China, Iran, and even India. During the Soviet era, Central Asia could play a pivotal role in Asian politics. To maintain a foreign policy of enlargement and engagement, the United States has established political stability, regional peace, and the maturation of market economies as policy goals for the five Central Asian states.

The tragedy for CARs after 1989, the self-sufficiency of Central Asian economies was disappeared and the supply chains of consumption goods and raw materials were destroyed. In another words the Central Asian republics have suffered sharp economic dislocation since gaining independence. They were suddenly cut off from the Russian centralized command economy that directed their resource allocation, long-range planning, investment funding, and management. Exploitation of rich natural energy and mineral resources (former Soviet Union) has been stalled. The Central Asian republics are landlocked, and goods must transit through other nation via transportation networks that do not yet exist (other than through Russia). Because of Central Asia Countries are surrounded by other countries and does not have its own ports. So that lack of access to resources resulted in increasing poverty, making it even more difficult for the economies to focus on industrial growth. Serious political, economic, ethnic, religious, and social challenges confront the Central Asian states. Economic reform and movement toward a market economy have been uneven. The states fear that further economic dislocation will produce massive internal unrest and political instability. Instability may provide external state intervention such as USA, Russia, China and India, and Iran with an opportunity for expanding influence. But the risk that such instability might rebound back on them is too great. Thus Iran, Pakistan, India, Russia, and China each seek to promote stability in Central Asia while expanding their own regional influence. The greatest threats to Central Asian security are internal conflict. The process of nation building, the legitimacy crisis, rapid social and economic transformation, ethnic diversity, border disputes, and other issues are all sources of instability in the post-Soviet republics of Central Asian States. The lack of a modern financial system, a transportation network,

banking institutions, and an enforceable legal system all hamper foreign investment. Martha Brill Olcott argues that secular leaders themselves are responsible for Islam's growth: What none of Central Asia's leaders seem to understand is that Islam is not the agent of instability and the competing power they taken to be, but that its spread is instead a response to their own inability to control their economies their societies and their states¹. Whether Islam itself is an element of instability is debatable, but authorities' fears-provoking arrests, imprisonment, and exiles-fuel the flames of intolerance and authoritarianism that surely do destabilize the region².

The opening up of China in the 1980s and the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1989s, followed by the shockwaves of 9/11, and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq changed all that: Central Asia, with its proximity to neighbouring Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan and Iraq, has gained attention in the geopolitical efforts to contain the "arc of instability" from the Middle East to South Asia. Central Asia lies at the core of the Eurasian, the most dynamic part of today's global economy, surrounded by rapidly growing China, India and Russia. Central Asia is a potential transit hub for the rapidly expanding trans-continental Eurasian trade and capital flows. Moreover it is the repository of large energy and mineral resources and home to a large and well educated population. With the region's great natural resources and its central location are main factors lead to rapidly integrating Eurasian economic space of all neighbouring countries. Europe and the US want to see more diversified energy transport routes towards the west through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. China is looking to develop the pipeline infrastructure towards the east, and India and Pakistan are eager to tap Central Asia's energy resources towards the south.

Geo-Economic Significance of Central Asia

Central Asia like sandwich between Eastern Europe in the west and Russia, China in the East and India, Afghanistan and Pakistan in the South after independence but it has more important for the entire world, because of gateway of Eurasia. Central Asia has been the battle ground is once more a key to the security of all Eurasia. As Russia, geo-strategically engaged in CARs with complex geopolitical movement and trapped in geo-economic competition into its adjoining. Oil becomes more important assets for sustaining economy and stable government of any country. As the struggle for Eurasian oil and Caspian petroleum is a multidimensional security, geo-political and economic game. US oil firms dominate, controlling 75 percent of new oil fields with an investment of \$30 billion, representing 30-40 percent of foreign investments in Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. Energy companies from the UK, France, Turkey, Iran, and Japan are also present. The Central Asian countries are benefiting from competition between the powers. They have maintained close relations with Moscow, since much of their oil and gas exports continue to transit via Russia⁴. The proven as well as unexplored energy reserves of Central Asia and the post-September scenario have again increased its significance in the world power struggle.

Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan ranked 4th and 6th in the world in terms of natural resource reserves endowed with oil, gas, uranium, zinc, tungsten and gold. Thus, collectively the Caspian region contains about 46 per cent of the world gas resources. Kyrgyzstan has an abundance of water resources and the energy potential of its mountain rivers is estimated at 163 billion kilowatt-hours (bkwh) per year. Tajikistan is also rich in water resources about 65% of the total estimate of central Asia⁵. The implications of sharing a land border with two of the most powerful nations in the world are manifold. Not only does it provide avenues of trade and diplomatic depth for the Central Asian Republics, it provides an avenue for the current world hegemony. At the end of 2009 the proven oil reserves of Kazakhstan are 39.8 which make 3.0% of the total and Turkmenistan having 74.2 thousand billion barrels which constitutes 5.6% of the total world share⁶. Kazakhstan having 1.82 trillion meters of gas which forms 1.0% of the total gas reserves and Turkmenistan 8.10 which is about 4.3% of the total world⁷. These untapped energy resources have dragged the world powers to seek their own interests. In 2009, Turkmenistan's proven gas reserves fourth largest in the world after Russia, Iran, and Qatar. The only energy sources are not reason for world power struggle in Central Asia but region has remained the hub of Sunni dominated regions with famous cities of Bukhara and Samarkand which are historically most important cities in CARs.

The Central Asia has a strategic position lies at the crossroads of Asia, Europe, the Persian Gulf, the Middle East, and the Far East. It is also surrounded by some of the fastest growing economies in the world including China, Russia and India. Who are not only investing in the region but are competing for

the leading role. The regions northern and eastern neighbours could be perceived as the emerging powers and may pose a threat to the supremacy of America⁸. These great powers made Central Asian region as a chessboard for outsmarting one another through cleverness and wit and at times adapting policies of appeasement⁹. In other words, Central Asia has become a "zone of intense, complex interaction between local conditions and the larger world system"¹⁰. The reasons for contestation in Central Asia are due to the absence of any single power capable of holding Central Asia and keeping other powers at distance and revival of interest in geopolitics as a viable framework for describing, explaining, and understanding the international affairs of Central Asia¹¹. Now, more than hundred years later, World Power once again positions them to control the heart of the Eurasian landmass during the early 1989. Today there are different actors and the rulers of the new colonial power are far more complex and subtle than those of a century ago. The United States has taken over the leading role with slogans of new world order, end of history and end of ideology. Along with the present of Russia, new regional powers such as China, India, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan have entered the new Eurasian landmass. This geographical possession is important because of connecting traditional East and West and North and South trade routes. What is the new in Central Asia is the involvement of both international and regional players who are not fighting for the control of territory but access for resources to gain strategic position and natural resources. Actually the difference lies in the nature of interest and approach adapted by USA, Russia, China, India and Iran (the main players) to gain their foothold in Central Asia and Caucasus Region. The natures of the geo-politics means that these players should follow the policies of coexist, cooperate, and compete at the different levels of their interactions in the region. The fall of USSR had weakened the state grip over the different elements of state and could possibly be used as fertile ground for extremism and fundamentalism. The influence of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran could create pan-Islamic groups in Central Asia¹².

India's role in Central Asia

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the loss of it as a superpower patron created serious security concerns for India. New Delhi feared that Central Asian instability would mirror the chaos of the Caucasus regions. Border realignment, ethnic disputes, resurgent Islam, and civil war would directly affect the territorial integrity of Afghanistan, which, in domino fashion, would influence Pakistan, Iran, and Kashmir. In such an environment drug trafficking, illegal arms, and crime syndicates would flourish, threatening not only Central Asia but all of its neighbours. Such a scenario would inevitably have consequences for India's national security¹³. India is also alarmed at Pakistan's call for Central Asia as a strategic hinterland and its Islamic initiatives such as the ECO. As a consequence, India is seeking new security arrangements with the Central Asia republics. New relations with Central Asia are a part of a larger realignment following the end of the Cold War, although Pakistan remains the immediate threat. India has improved relations with Iran, which in turn helped persuade Pakistan to drop a United Nations motion to censure India for its human rights record in Kashmir. Relations with the US have improved since India opened refuelling facilities to US military aircraft during the Gulf War. The recent US - India Memorandum of Understanding includes armed forces joint exercises and training, visits between senior civilian officials for policy planning and joint research and development projects. Russia is now more an economic than a political partner. Cash-strapped Kremlin officials have willingly sold equipment and spare parts; over 70 percent of India's military equipment comes from factories in the Former Soviet Union. Russia now supports a nuclear free zone in South Asia. China remains the long-term threat to India's regional ascendancy. China still occupies twelve thousand square miles of Indian Territory, and remains neutral on the Kashmir controversy, supporting a peaceful resolution under the framework of the Shimla Agreement. China has established new agreements with Pakistan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, which Indian analysts view as encirclement to contain India. The new security environment presents both challenges and opportunities for India to influence Central Asian affairs. Pakistan's failure does not mean India's success, nor does Central Asia's distrust of Pakistan's Islamic agenda make it pro-Indian. As a nonaligned, non-Islamic state, India rejected military alliances, security agreements, and cultural ties as tools for promoting stability in Central Asia, focusing instead on bilateral economic programs. India's special relationship with the Russia provided New Delhi with existing economic links (such as a consulate in Tashkent) and a lively trade with the Central Asian republics. India offered many advantages to Central Asian authorities who were converting to a market economy: large urban, educated elite, fluent

in English; a functional Anglo-Saxon judicial system; industry and management based on Western lines; and an established and vibrant stock market¹⁴.

India's economic programs focused on the two regional essential elements: Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. India offered credits worth ten million dollars to Tashkent in 1992 and 1993, and in 1992 signed a treaty on "the principles of interstate relations and bilateral cooperation", promising cooperation in fighting terrorism, arms and drug trafficking, and extremist ideologies¹⁵. In 1992 India signed a group of agreements with Almaty to develop its textile and hotel industries. India also offered Kazakhstan \$10 million in credits in 1992 and 1993¹⁶. An April 1992 Indo-Turkmen agreement promised cooperation in fields such as natural gas extraction, chemicals, agricultural products processing, hotel construction, and banking. In June 1994 India offered Turkmenistan a ten-year loan worth \$5 million¹⁷. Little has been done with Kyrgyzstan. India will support politically the secular government, because strategic denial of fundamentalist Islam in Central Asia will remain a prominent concern. New Delhi will continue to use economic, political and technical assistance as a policy tool and to enhance its own commercial, economic and political interests.

China's Role in Central Asia

The Chinese Foreign Minister said that Russia and China have common interests in preserving stability in the Central Asian region. Chinese policy toward Central Asia would take into account the close ties that had been established over time between Russia and the region. How China manages its relations with Central Asia will have profound significance for security within China, as well as its future relations with regional rivals, the Middle East, and South Asia¹⁸. China's worst nightmare is that unrest in Central Asia will spill over into the Xinjiang-Uyghur (XUAR) Autonomous Region (XUAR, formerly known as Eastern or Chinese Turkestan). The history of this province, so distant from Beijing, mirrors the chaos in Moscow's borderlands during this century. During the early Soviet period the Red Army exploited local revolts to gain control of the region. In 1933, 1944 and 1946 the Soviets tried to establish an "independent" Kazakh- Uyghur East Turkestan Republic. Thousands of Kazakhs fled to XUAR following the suppression the Basmachi Revolt and Stalinist collectivization. In return, following a mass revolt in 1962 and the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, the Peoples Liberation Army halted cross border transit from XUAR into Kazakhstan only after up to 70,000 Uyghur had fled, with five hundred and thirty thousand square kilo meters. The Xinjiang-Uyghur represents one-sixth of the People's Republic of China and over 60 percent are Muslim. These areas are considerable strategic importance, as they house China's principal nuclear testing and missile launching sites and much of its "gulag archipelag"¹⁹. The XUAR holds vast natural resources needed to fuel China's modernization, including unexploited petroleum reserves in the Tarim Basin (sufficient to free Beijing from future dependence on Middle East petroleum) and large deposits of natural gas, iron, and coal²⁰. As controls over the Muslim majority relaxed in the 1980s, mosques reopened, tolerated Muslim religious practices. Nevertheless, unrest fermented again at the end of the 1980s with a series of incidents in December 1986, June 1988, May 1989, and April 1990 that resulted in Muslims' deaths at the hands of authorities quick to suppress.

After independence of Central Asia, exiled Uyghurs in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan pressed for the national liberation of the XUAR. However, Chinese anxiety over Central Asian countries, as Beijing realized that the leaders of the new regions did not support the separatist movements. Because of Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, Karimov of Uzbekistan, and Niyazov of Turkmenistan, Akayev of Kyrgyzstan and Rakhmanov of Tajikistan were all belonging to Communist Parties. However, the threat of nationalist movement and Islamic resurgence in Central Asia remains the core element of Chinese policy in the region. Chinese policy towards Central Asia is designed to maintain political stability and economic development for maintain peace and security. China border with Central Asia and the transportation links in place to provide the access to Central Asia. It has also embarked on an ambitious program of rail and pipeline construction that would go a long way toward freeing Central Asia from dependency on Russia.

China hopes to use Central Asian markets as incentive to fuel a new prosperity zone in Xinjiang (autonomous province) for foreign investment (especially by Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan) and revive the Silk Route, pushing Chinese economic interests beyond Central Asia to the Persian Gulf and even European markets. Beijing expects economic growth in Xinjiang and Central Asia to strengthen the secular-minded governments of Central Asia against those groups which favour Islamic rule and prevent

the republics from returning to dependence on Russia²¹. In 1990s, China could offer major trade as well as capital and technology to the economically weak Central Asian republics. By doing this, China's strengthening republics' economies and establishing the regions. The Beijing clearly agrees that economic and technology development offers the best chance of limiting future ethnic and religious conflict.

Stability in Central Asia is essential to Beijing's continued economic growth as well as political stability because of China has shifted from export and import of crude oil. It is estimated that China will have to import 100 million tons of crude by 2010 unless it finds new sources. China knows that, weak Central Asian is potential for energy of the twenty-first century. If the Chinese build a pipeline, Central Asia's importance to China will shift massively in the next century. Chinese military attitudes toward Central Asian energy are safeguarding its strategic oil reserves. As Graham Fuller has noted,

There is no reason to believe that China will remain immune to the forces of breakup that have affected nearly all post-Communist empires and multi-ethnic groups. ... Few Muslim minorities ever remain happily contained within another state and culture, especially a Communist one. The model of political independence lies just over the border in former Soviet Central Asia²².

China's economic and political changes have impact mixed consequences for Central Asia. At the present day, they can play the "China card" to prevent dependence on Moscow. In the short-term Russia and China share a common interest in deterring ethno-nationalism and resurgent Islam in the region. Moscow and Beijing will collaborate to maintain political and economic stability even as each jockeys to increase its economic hold over the region. If Russia's decline continues unabated, in the long run, the Central Asian states risk simply changing masters. They must counterbalance Russia and China with other economic powerhouses from Asia, such as India, Japan or South Korea, the United States, the Middle East, and Europe.

U S's role in Central Asia

The United States is also playing more important role in Central Asian political and economic affairs. It has supported an expanded Indian role in Central Asia, evident in the US strategy for a New Silk Road which would link India with Central Asia, ultimately with the West. This initiative, launched in 2011, aims to help stabilise Afghanistan and the broader Central Asian region by developing cross- and intra-regional trade, energy, and transit connections²³. It is also perceived as a means for the US to sustain its economic interests in the Central Asia region by bypassing Russia, Iran, and China while linking India with Europe via Central Asia,- thus providing new investment opportunities for US business²⁴. Meanwhile, US involvement in Afghanistan is seen to expand the political, economic and military space available to India in the region. According to Stephen Blank, "Washington's presence allows India to play, or at least aspire to, a greater Central Asian role than it could achieve on its own. Washington also counts on New Delhi playing an expanded role in Afghanistan and Central Asia as its troops depart Afghanistan"²⁵. Kaplan goes further and avers that "As the United States and China become great power rivals, the direction in which India tilts could determine the course of geopolitics in Eurasia in the 21st century. India, in other words, looms as the ultimate pivot state"²⁶.

However, India is yet to capitalise on this ostensibly pivotal role in Central Asia. It continues to lag behind Russia and especially China in the region. China's obstructionism towards Indian efforts to engage in Central Asia also suggests that it may view India as a 'stalking horse' for the United States²⁸. Meanwhile, China is well advanced in the process of building its own 'Silk Road,' well before US-India plans to revive the historical trading route has got beyond the drawing-board .

The primary focus of the United States will be damage control-to prevent existing problems from escalating into crises that might engage Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, or India: the United States is more concerned that the region does not become the breeding ground of civil war, nuclear proliferation, radical Islamic movements, a battle ground for Asian geopolitics an ecological wasteland an economic basket case or the target of a resurgent Russian imperial vision. The geopolitical centrality of Central Asia-its spokes radiating out in all directions across vital continent-is of considerable importance²⁹.

The territorial integrity and political security of the Central Asian states are ostensibly guaranteed under the collective security agreement of the Commonwealth of Independent States. But Russia's calls for political and economic integration, its statements that Central Asia is within its sphere of influence,

and its efforts to deny Western or international participation in peacekeeping efforts threaten that security. The US does not want to "contain" Russia in Central Asia, but it opposes coercion and intimidation of neighbouring states. The United States endorses regional cooperation only so long as it is truly and totally voluntary and only if it opens doors to the outside world³⁰. During the March 1996 visit of Department of State and Department of Defense officials to Kazakhstan, US delegates stressed that "the United States has no intention whatsoever of interfering in Russian- Kazakh issues relating to the deployment of Russian military bases on the territory of Kazakhstan. The US would support the process of CIS integration, but wanted" these processes to be carried out taking into account the national interests of all countries involved, which would allow each country in the area to feel itself a proper participant in the world community and world economic system. "Kazakhstan: US. Ambassador Discusses Defense Conversion Program Almaty"³¹.

There are not short-term solutions to Central Asia's problems. Indeed, with proposed slashes in foreign aid, direct US government involvement to support the Central Asian states economically and politically will be limited. US legal and technical assistance in tackling issues such as environmental protection, drug enforcement, organized crime, and weapons proliferation would also be useful. The United States can also channel its efforts through international organizations that provide social programs such as refugee relief, health care, and family planning. Washington can support an enhanced role in the region for the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, to which all the Central Asian republics belong. The United States can bolster moderate Islamic republics, which serve as mentors for economic and political development. Some of the scholar said that the desire to replace the CIS with a Central Asian forum clearly exists, but the lack of leadership in the region and the persistent mutual suspicion among the five Central Asian countries prevents concrete initiatives. US support of the development of inclusive market democracies can do much to ease those fears.

According to Prof. Frederick Starr, "The new US strategy is concentrated on the development of an integrated strategy of economic and social development in Afghanistan, which means construction of [a] new system of transport and trade routes along the ancient Silk road... A new economic strategy acknowledges the reality that the Afghan struggle is regional in scope, affecting the rest of Central Asia, Pakistan, India, China, Iran, etc., and must be resolved on a regional basis"³². Therefore, the region would bring together by the common benefits of enhanced trade and investment through the help of a well developed network of roads, railways, and air routes. It is hoped that such a tightly woven economic system would keep Afghanistan on the path to forming a stable government and the entire region that encompasses the CAS safe from political instability and threats of terrorism. The US has also officially retained its focus on encouraging democratization and the rule of law in Central Asia. Although its efforts at promoting these values in negotiations with state leaders have been patently unsuccessful. For instance, the US first needs to regulate interstate relations in Central Asia, and the dialogue between Pakistan and India needs to be restored. The Silk Road Strategy may indeed be inevitable, as the US administration asserts. While the European Union joined the game for investment and influence over the CAS later the United States until 2007. The EU has been working to forge an alternative relationship with the energy-rich CAS, and a number of senior officials have paid visits to the states since 2010.

In October 2011, EU Energy Commissioner Günther Oettinger announced a new bid on the part of the European Union to create a Trans-Caspian gas pipeline. This submarine route under the Caspian Sea would go from Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan and Central Europe, bypassing both Russia and Iran³³. An invitation to participate has been extended to Kazakhstan as well, after the Russia-Ukraine gas wars of winter 2006 that left swaths of European territory through which the gas transit routes lay with no heating. This is the first time the EU has come forward with a proposal for a new Central Asian pipeline in its history. Its fate is yet uncertain, and both Russia and Iran have put forth vociferous objections. The EU was considered the CAS' main trade partner until it was overtaken by China in 2010. In 2008, exports to the whole region stood at \$6 billion and imports at \$12.8 billion³⁴; in 2009, EU bilateral trade with Kazakhstan alone was reported as \$16.6 billion³⁵. Iran has been two other powers that have struggled to assert their influence in Central Asia, or reassert it. Since both countries share their historic, ethnic, and religious legacy with the region's inhabitants. Iran's standoff with the United States over its nuclear program has been the key concern of its foreign policy, leaving little space for cooperation with the

CAS. While now a minor trade and investment partner of Central Asia, Iran would like to focus more on establishing pipelines in the region, in addition to the two gas routes it built from Turkmenistan in 1997 and 2010. However, US threats of sanctions against companies doing business with Iran have so far stopped the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Pipeline and the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline from advancing beyond the planning stage.

CONCLUSION

After breakup of the Soviet Union and with decline of the Russian influence in Central Asia, US, China, India, Pak and Western Europe have got the best opportunity in this region. But China gets more benefit from Central Asian States because of its long land border with the Central Asian states and its massive economic muscle gives it considerable leverage in the region. Since China forged diplomatic relations with the five Central Asian states in 1992, its overall trade with the region has increased over a hundred-fold³⁶. China is the most prominent economic actor and main source of foreign investment in the region. This has enabled China to outpace India throughout Central Asia in terms of volumes of trade and investment, energy acquisitions, and the building of transport and infrastructure networks. In 2012 India's overall trade volume with the five central Asian republics was estimated at \$500 million³⁷. In contrast, China's trade with the five states in 2012 amounted to nearly \$46 billion³⁸. In the energy sphere, India has been beaten by China when it comes to securing energy acquisitions.

In June 2013, India lost when Astana blocked its deal to buy a major stake in the giant Kashagan oilfield from a US company. The Kazakh Government purchased it and then sold it on to China. China already receives 40 bcm of natural gas annually from Turkmenistan, a figure projected to rise much higher when Chinese pipelines from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are added, and there are concerns in India that China will resist its attempts to gain access to Central Asia's natural gas through the TAPI pipeline³⁹. Recently there have been indications of rapprochement and of a more cooperative approach between India and China in Central Asia. In August 2013, senior officials from India's Ministry of Foreign Affairs met with their counterparts in Beijing to discuss a range of issues relating to Central Asia. These reportedly included "regional security and counter-terrorism, SCO, energy security, development partnerships, and people-to-people contacts with the countries of the region"⁴⁰. They were the first ever official bilateral talks on the region held between the two countries, and open the possibility of further cooperation between New Delhi and Beijing⁴¹. Subsequently a delegation from China headed to New Delhi to discuss issues related to Afghanistan, including the consequences of NATO withdrawal in 2014. India and China clearly have some shared concerns in the region, especially where issues of security are concerned, and the August talks identified a number of areas of potential complementarity between the two countries. India's engagement in the region will continue to be characterised by competition with China.

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