

The Central Asian Strategic Environment

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary Central Asian strategic environment is a mix of tangibles like great power competition, natural resources, structural frameworks, infrastructure, trade, commerce, intelligence operations, assassinations, terrorism, arms race and domestic political instability. And the next door is Afghanistan. Central Asia is now getting integrated in world trade, which it once dominated. Historically, the origin of the Central Asian domination of the world trade through military power can be traced back in the times gone by to the rise of Mongol Empire. The centre of gravity of Mongol Empire was Central Asia and both the trade and the military power was land-based. The expanse of the Mongol Empire stretched from the Yellow Sea in the east to the Mediterranean in the west. This domination continued and persisted for more than a century. And at the heart of it was the superior Mongol horsemanship and an effective military tactics i.e., the Mongol Blitzkrieg. However, this centre of mass i.e., of the power and trade shifted from Central Asia to China in the east and Russia in the northwest from 15th century onwards; unleashing the decline of the Mongol Empire. The end result was the break-up of the empire into bickering Khanates vying for power and influence at the cost of each other. Nevertheless, Central Asia re-emerged on the world political scene in 19th century as a result of the Great Game between the then British Indian Empire and the expanding Czarist Russian Empire. The region became part of Russian Empire as a result of 1907 Anglo-Russian agreement that was followed by the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the communist takeover of Central Asia. The Sovietization of Central Asia ended with the disintegration of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991. The communist turned nationalist transition was generally peaceful, except for Tajikistan, where Islamists were first contained and then integrated. Still, the Central Asian Republics (CARs) are faced with the challenges of economic and industrial development, dependence on the export of oil, gas, and raw materials as opposed to the industrial products, as also the disadvantage of being a land-locked region. Central Asia is surrounded by great and regional powers pushing the leadership into balancing acts in an uncertain strategic environment. Moreover, Central Asia is a geo-strategic region that is also the centre of gravity

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of great and regional power competition e.g., the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as opposed to the American Silk Road.

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INTRODUCTION

Mackinder's Heartland is vital for the enforcement of American global hegemony. It is also central for Russia to remain relevant and sovereign globally. The stability in Central Asia, Caucasus, Baltics and in the Eurasian landmass which Russia occupies is important for it. Russia wants a big-picture deal to establish an architecture in Europe and Central Asia to set limits for American, Russian, Chinese, European, Iranian and Indian interests. Not to mention the Chinese efforts to fully establish a trade corridor between East and West. Central Asia is in the middle of this already functional East-West trade corridor. The great power focus is on Central Asia for that is where the future growth is likely to come from. The CARs decades ago became independent on 26th December 1991, as the USSR disintegrated, though, the mayhem had started in Eastern Europe in 1989. The CARs leadership watched from a distance. The reluctance on the part of Central Asian communists to declare independence was visible for they formally declared it after the coup against Gorbachev failed in 1991. The Central Asian governance system within the framework of USSR was a three-fold mixture of command economy, market access and the soviet subsidies. Now with USSR no more there to subsidize the CARs politically, strategically and economically, the Central Asians transitioned from being communists to nationalists overnight. This was a new psychological experience for the Central Asians at individual and collective levels of consciousness. They were at their own in a new world. President Boris Yeltsin's foreign policy priorities consisted in a rapprochement with the West and the simultaneous neglect of Central Asia, which was considered a financial burden (Jonson, 2004, p. 43). However, the revanchist Russia, since then, under Vladimir Putin has made a remarkable and meaningful geo-political comeback impacting deeply the geo-strategic environment in Central Asia, Europe and beyond.

With the USSR controlled energy-grid gone, the pipeline politics, and the identities and languages posing challenges—the independence placed CARs on a bumpy road in a competitive strategic environment. The CARs were now players, as also, opponents between themselves. One difference is the different raw materials possessed by the five republics—Kazakhstan has oil, uranium, chromite, bauxite, coal and copper; Turkmenistan has massive gas reserves; Uzbekistan has cotton, gas, gold, copper and uranium; whereas, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan has water resources, electricity and labour-export as well. Nonetheless, all five share the same fatal handicap, namely geographical centrality, and since they are landlocked, they exist only on the periphery of the international flow of goods (Baumer, 2018, p. 261). An example could be Central Asia's continuing trade dependence on China. Trade between China and the Central Asian region grew to US\$89 billion (£69 billion) in 2023, an increase of 27% on the previous year (Lombardozzi, 2025). The long-term strategic positioning of China is evident from the Chinese investment in Central Asia that had reached \$63.9 billion by the time Xi'an Summit took place in 2023 (including \$15 billion in 2022 alone), financing various energy, transport, and manufacturing projects (Zuenku, 2025). Still, an additional aspect of the ongoing New Great Game between the

great and regional powers is the competitive integration of Central Asian natural resources into the world economy, making Multinational Corporations (MNCs) players too. In this context, the second largest trading partner by 2023 with regard to combined foreign trade with Central Asia was European Union (EU), which additionally marked the mobilisation of \$10 billion in infrastructure and connectivity from the Global Gateway Investors Forum in 2024 (European Council, 2025). Besides, the failures in Afghanistan and Iraq bring to the fore the resource rich CARs, plus, the strategic handling of Iran, Pakistan, Russia and China in the perception of Americans. The quadripartite moot during the 80th UN General Assembly session restated support for Afghanistan as an independent, united, and peaceful state, free from terrorism, war, and narcotics (Iqbal, 2025). However, these problems persist to the dismay of world community.

Moreover, a Chinese-Pakistani alliance taking shape, most visibly in the construction of the Gwadar Port, near the Strait of Hormuz, and an Indian naval build-up on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, near the Strait of Malacca, the Indian-Chinese rivalry is taking on the dimensions of a maritime Great Game (Laruelle, 2008, p. 104), not to mention the Indo-Pak May 2025 clashes and earlier the May 2020 Sino-Indian operational escalation in the Karakoram and Himalayan Ranges. Also, the geo-economic inroads in Central Asia by the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are part of an evolving reality (Xing, 2019, p. 30). The BRI is a project that aims to link inter-regional trade across 60 Asian and European countries along a new Silk Road (Xing, 2019, p. 30). The Silk Road Economic Belt Transmission Corridor i.e., the construction of power transmission channel from Xinjiang in China to the five CARs, plus the Russian and Mongolian transmission channels to China along with a networking channel with neighbouring countries in the south has become an important measure for the implementation of the BRI (Huang, *et.al.*, 2019, p. 56). Moreover, the US and CARs too have pledged to work to build economic and trade ties that would connect Central Asia to the South Asian and European markets (Iqbal, 2020). The US Development Finance Corporation, the US Export-Import Bank, and the Department of Commerce's International Trade Administration are providing financial assistance for the projects in CARs (Iqbal, 2020). Still, Russia reasserting in CARs, Afghanistan and Ukraine is a strategic challenge for the United States of America. Meanwhile, Russia's Lukoil and Gazprom are the chief foreign operators working in Uzbekistan's main gas fields, and Moscow controls 25 percent of Kazakhstan's uranium production (Little, 2025).

The Central Asians may not be interested, but the world is certainly interested in them for they are rich in natural resources. As a whole, Eurasia is up for a grab as a sphere of influence with Central Asia yet again emerging as the contested Heartland. In Europe, the countries concerned are largely the same, those covered by Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, stretching from the Baltic coast to the Black Sea (Lucas, 2008, p. 129). However, unlike Germany; the challenge this time is Sino-Russian (Rehman, 2014, p. 8). The Russian strategic thinking towards China has changed owing to American build-up in Eastern Europe, Ukraine, Syria and the sanctions against Russia (Malle, 2017). The contest resembles a battle-hardened chess grand master playing against a bunch of inattentive and squabbling amateurs (Lucas, 2008, p. 132). The Russian military success in Ukraine is an example. The Central Asians are wary and cautious of all keeping in view their Cold War and the post-USSR experience. For we live in one of those rare moments in history when the political and economic axis of the world is shifting from the West to the East (Macaes, 2019, p. 1), and Central Asians know that Eurasia and by extension Central Asia is at the heart of

this monumental shift of power, wealth and influence. The geo-political and geo-economic winds are blowing in the reverse direction after centuries of Western domination. Still, Asia/Central Asia lacks the collective consciousness which the West possesses. The Central Asians are surrounded by Russia, China, Iran; and the multifaceted US presence in Central Asia, whereas, India, Turkey and Pakistan have an indirect influence on the Central Asian decision making. The CARs are playing one against the other to strike the best possible bargain in the context of connectivity and trade. An economically open Central Asia will be more attractive for the outsiders. Besides, Central Asians lack an inductive consciousness to be industrially competitive. The big question is: How are the CARs realigning as nation-states while pursuing their national interests in the changing regional and global strategic environments?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The theoretical framework is ‘Mackinder’s Heartland Theory witnessing the exit of Columbian Age’ (Taylor, 1989, p. 47-48). The New Age is of novel explorations and altered strategic environments. The Central Asian steppe, the Heartland, is the heart of the New Great Game. The management of strategic and economic interests at the expense of others has emerged as the center of gravity of the New Great Game. The game is about geo-economic and geo-strategic interests. And the renewed interest in Central Asia is rooted in the oil, gas and mineral wealth. The variables include the transportation routes like the BRI and the New Silk Road, lithium, gold, silver, copper, cobalt, iron, rare earths and other minerals and metals in addition to the investments, oil and gas pipelines and the military bases. Eurasia is viewed as a sphere of influence to establish a new Balance of Power. The methodology employed is an ‘empiric-analytic reason’ (Wilber, 2000). This implies an inductive approach as opposed to a deductive one. Deduction posits; whereas, induction examines the truth on case to case basis. In this context, quantitative is how much; whereas, qualitative is change in that how much. The quantification in this case is macro supported by micro.

CONCEPTUAL CONTEXT

Any strategic environment is made-up of facts creating a climate and is a mixture of psychological, perceptual, strategic, political, economic and cultural facts in which any given policy or an event unfolds (Rehman, 2011, p. 4). It is macro, not micro. The strategic elements that affect the use of engagements may be classified into various types: moral, physical, mathematical, geographical and statistical (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 183). A good strategist breathes in the ambiance of a strategic environment to interpret a policy or an event, as reality disentangles. The macro context of Central Asian strategic environment is primarily an intended infrastructural connectivity and the potential economic integration. The regional and extra- regional competition over Central Asia is in the same context too. Take for example the idea of Sino-American competition that revolves around dominating the Eurasian strategic environment in the context of trade, technology, culture and strategy. Likewise, this is happening between the two in Central Asia as well. Resultantly, the ambiance of the unfolding Central Asian strategic environment is increasingly competitive and murky. The detailed information is not needed to conduct an analysis of a policy or an event in the given Central Asian strategic environment. For, it is a logic of strategy itself that dictates the impossibility of concurrent advances in all the spheres (Luttwak, 2012, p.

95). The uncertainty remains. The handling of a strategic environment is taxing. An analysis should be solid and holistic and not fragmented. It is like walking on a razor-sharp edge and making decisions. Any misanalysis is equally important keeping in view its repercussions. Mostly, it is one crisis after another. The idea is that strategic environment dictates. It brings to fore the principals in order to handle a strategic environment. It is fluid and dynamic and keeps changing because of the ever-changing strategic capacities of various players.

AN OVERVIEW OF CENTRAL ASIAN STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

The dissolution of the USSR was a historical event that altered the global and regional strategic environments, and within that the climate for the leadership of CARs to make policy decisions, especially in the geo-economic sense. The same is true in the context of post 9/11 decades and the American inroads in the CARs that have been rolled-back. The United States after 9/11 used airbases in Central Asia to support the attack on the Taliban in Afghanistan (Lucas, 2008, p. 200). However, Russians are back in their *Near Abroad*; whereas, Chinese are in Central Asia for good. China, using its distinctive socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics, has provided a dynamic alternative vision to that of America (Stiglitz, 2019, p. 28). The decision making and the associated processes have been fruitful during the post-independence and post-9/11 decades for the Central Asians. The CARs successfully navigated and steered through the uncharted waters despite the geo-economic, geo-political and geo-strategic challenges. A higher level of consciousness, high-culture, the rich historical experience plus the developed mental functions culturally and academically were critical in this context.

All CARs have successfully transitioned from being Soviet colonies to client states. Earlier different liberalisation strategies were adopted for the successful transition and integration e.g., the intended land-tenure arrangement after the Soviet dissolution (Waqas & Saleem, 2019). The process of integration of CARs with the surrounding countries of the region and beyond and the world at large continues. Importantly, after over three decades of the dissolution of Soviet Union, none of the CARs is a case of failed expectations or an unstable country. And crucial for the continued stability in Central Asia were several key factors, including the adoption of established power structures, land tenure arrangements and the general continuation of official staff, which the populations also accepted (with the exception of Tajikistan) (Baumer, 2018, p. 294). The State of Tajikistan plunged into a civil war between the nationalists, communists and the Islamists after the gaining of independence. Nonetheless, Tajiks have resolved and recovered from the civil war of the 1990s, though, they continue to be apprehensive of Afghanistan. In this context, Tajikistan has a bilateral defence agreement with Russia until 2042 and Russian troops are stationed on Tajik-Afghan border. Likewise, Tajikistan and China have signed 300 agreements covering almost all areas of activities including Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership agreement in 2024, elevating ties to the highest level (Lemon & Norov, 2025). However, the killing of five Chinese nationals inside Tajikistan as a result of the attacks launched from Afghanistan is an alarming development. Tajikistan has also developed strong military and intelligence ties with Pakistan in addition to the ever-increasing trade between the two countries through Karachi and Gwadar ports. Similarly, the Chinese intention to finance a railway corridor that links Central Asia to the Pakistani ports through Afghanistan is a transformative step for peace and regional connectivity (Major milestones achieved during China visit: Dar, 2025).

The coming together of China, Russia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and CARs is an unfolding reality and part of the Eurasian strategic environment and the strategic management of it by China. An immediate, mid and long-term challenge faced by the CARs is that of having a positive functional relationship with the Islamists domestically. The relationship between the state and religion, particularly, the idea of pan-Islamism is of an immense unease for the CARs. The leadership response was/is an effective one. Still, the situation in Afghanistan is of concern for the CARs leadership. In this context, the UN has warned that the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) with the logistical and operational support from the de facto Afghan authorities and extremist fighters that moved from the Syrian Arab Republic to Afghanistan could stage operations against regional states, including in Central Asia (United Nations Security Council, 2025). Also, the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderland instability and the deadly cross-border clashes threaten to escalate into a wider regional conflict. Nevertheless, the trilateral meeting between Pakistan, China and Afghanistan held in Beijing agreed to enhance security cooperation to promote peace and stability and reiterated their support for extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan (Permanent Mission of Pakistan to UN, 2025). Still, the big questions are: To what extent Islamic propaganda and practice be tolerated to prevent moderate Muslims from switching to the extremist camp, besides, where should the red line be drawn when it comes to the intervention of state power? (Baumer, 2018, p. 294). And at the other end of the spectrum, there have been no Central Asian Springs; not even on the horizon. However, a renewed American focus on Afghan Bagram Base is an obvious indication of increased US interest in Central Asia (Gafarov *et al.*, 2025). The Central Asian perception links the future stability of the region with Afghanistan. The Great Game never ended in Central Asia and today it is central to the 'Colder War' (Katusa, 2016, p. 39) of energy control and pipeline politics.

Besides, spurred by the clean energy transition, energy flows are also shifting to include not only, the transport of commodities—oil, gas, coal, or critical minerals—but also the trade of manufactured goods such as solar panel, wind turbines, batteries, and electrolyser (Bordoff & O'Sullivan, 2025, p. 67). China is firmly regulating the trade of these goods and is leading the global supply chain of critical minerals and rare earths. The US and EU are keen to address this global dominance of rare earths by China which is critical for advanced technology manufacturing. In this context, the EU has pledged to invest \$13 billion in critical minerals in EU-Central Asia summit at Uzbekistan while with the hosting of C5+1—known for the group of US and the five Central Asian countries—in the White House, Washington not only tries to assert influence in the energy-and mineral-rich region long dominated by China and Russia but also seeks to address China's dominance in rare earths (Del Valle *et al.*, 2025). At present, EU is the largest trading partner of Central Asia together with Russia and China. The US is trying to counterbalance China and Russia in the region. Resultantly, the reset in the US relationship with Pakistan, besides, the balancing of ties between Islamabad and Beijing, Washington is also aiming to increase Pakistan's capacity to contribute to economic and energy initiatives in South and Central Asia (Iqbal, 2025).

The Central Asians as opposed to those in the adjacent regions of South and South West Asia are highly educated possessing secular worldview. And a worldview is nothing but how one perceives oneself and the rest of the world. Other than Farghana Valley, the Central Asian Islam is largely rooted in mysticism and mystical traditions, compared to the Iranian and Saudi versions, respectively. The women too are integrated in the economies and the work ethics are qualitatively

high. However, the work-force of CARs lack the skills to produce exportable consumer products. Russia remains the primary destination for migrant workers. The reliance is still on the export of natural resources. This is a strategic disadvantage. Throughout the Caspian, Turkmen and Kazakh energy exports looking for transport routes results in a geo-political tussle between Russia and the West, whereas, China demonstrates a capacity to complete pipeline projects in a fraction of time, as opposed to the Western consortia dithering over financing, equity and political support. Still, owing to the renewed Western interests in Central Asia and sanctions against Russia, the Central Asians are seeking to diversify their economy. As such, it is precisely the type of development to fuel Russian fears that the Central Asian states are emerging as regional political actors in their own right (Bohr, 2025). In this context, Russian interest and assets in Venezuela present a potential “spheres-of-influence” bargain vis-à-vis the United States (Herbst & Marczak, 2019). The control of energy and technology is the New Great Game, and great powers are competing for it, not to mention the regional powers.

THE CHALLENGES OF CENTRAL ASIAN STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

The Central Asians are faced with the challenges on the domestic as well as foreign fronts. The mixture of CARs challenges include bilateral and multi-lateral foreign policy issues i.e., regional security, great-power competition, the multi-lateral water issue, lack of trade between CARs, economic and trade protectionism, high import duties, the discouraging level of transit fee, limitations on movement of capital, corruption, out-dated infrastructure, high labour costs, economic and industrial development, dependence on the export of oil, gas, and raw materials as opposed to the industrial products, along with the drawback of being a landlocked region. The product producing MNCs are not comfortable at doing business in Central Asia. Only those involved in the oil and gas trade and raw materials are operating in the CARs. In addition to these problems, the strategic disadvantage of CARs is the landlocked status of Central Asia. An indicator is that transport by sea makes up 75 percent of global volume and 67 percent of the value of world trade (Katusa, 2016, p. 39).

The Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) of the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) has turned the world into an open market for anyone who either has finished products or raw materials in abundance, especially the oil and gas. However, countries with natural resources located on the coastlines with ports have a price advantage, as opposed to the landlocked CARs. The additional economic disadvantage faced by the CARs, despite the resources, is the same faced by any other peripheral nation in the context of centre-periphery relationship. The CARs are not part of hegemonic capitalist core, and the functional leadership of CARs knows it. The 1648 Treaty of Westphalia ended the religion-inflamed Thirty Years’ War and which by the mid-twentieth century had become the recognized system through which states on every continent had agreed to their official interactions (Hill, 2010, p. 4). The post-USSR CARs leadership opted to join the Westphalian Nation-State system and are defending their national interests by striking the best-possible economic and security bargains e.g., the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRI. The geo-political and geo-economic balancing by the CARs leadership continues, and so far, successfully. The CARs effort to diversify is an indicator.

However, Central Asia in the mid and long-term belongs to China. It is too big for the CARs to resist. The aggregate bilateral balance of power—economic, political, technological, strategic—has already shifted in Beijing’s favour (Lo, 2008, p. 7). Alongside, Russia too is important for CARs in the strategic sense for CARs learnt the lesson after Russia annexed Crimea, let alone the war in Ukraine. Besides, Russians are back in Afghanistan to secure their Central Asian soft-underbelly; and have already signed a 20-years strategic partnership treaty with Iran (Iran’s long partnership deal with Russia ratified, 2025). The Russian perception still perceives Central Asia as its *Near Abroad*. More importantly, Pakistan has reversed more than two centuries old *Frontier Policy* and Russia is no more an adversary across the Amu River. Pakistan has settled Soviet-era trade dispute with Russia (Bhutta, 2019). The forging of these partnerships is positively influencing the strategic environment of CARs and Afghanistan. The Moscow-Kabul Nexus has paved the way for connecting Russia to South Asian markets and offers Russia the shortest land corridor to Pakistan’s Gwadar and Karachi ports, which are gateway to the Indian Ocean (Fatima, 2025).

Nevertheless, the presence of Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan is perceived by the Pakistanis, Chinese, Russians, Iranians, Afghans and Central Asians as a security threat. The Islamic State is a hybrid of insurgency, separatism, terrorism and criminality with deep roots in its immediate local environment, in broader regional conflicts and in geo-political battles that link what happens in Raqqa or Mosul to chancelleries in capitals across much of Asia and the West (Burke, 2015, p. 9). The IS in Afghanistan is an interesting variable, for its presence provides a rationale for the positions taken by the various state and non-state actors. The security situation in Afghanistan, in the tribal districts of north-west Pakistan and in Balochistan is central to the New Great Game and is the heart of Eurasian power struggle (Rehman, 2011, p. 1). Central Asia could become part of a huge Beijing-controlled economic zone including China, Mongolia, the Central Asian Republics, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran—besides Iran could also serve as a connecting link to equally resource-rich Azerbaijan and Russia (Baumer, 2018, p. 297). In this context, the trilateral meeting between China, Pakistan and Afghanistan agreed to deepen BRI cooperation and extend CPEC to Afghanistan under the broader framework of the BRI (Haider, 2025).

Additionally, Pakistan’s south-western province of Balochistan across the Indus too has emerged as central to the Eurasian and Central Asian power struggle for the control of natural resources. Other than the strategic route connecting Central Asia, Balochistan’s strategic significance is vested in its mineral wealth including rare earths, gold, copper and hydrocarbons. The Exim Bank of the United States has approved \$1.25 billion to finance the extraction of critical minerals, rare earths, copper, gold and silver in Balochistan (Ahmed, 2025). The Chinese are creating their reality. Americans are resisting it. Two models of trade are clashing in Balochistan and how Pakistan will manage the two is a million dollar question. The New Great Game is a contest between Russia, China and America for power and influence in Central Asia (Cooley, 2012, p. 3). If CPEC actually comes to fruition, China would build a trade and economic empire of unparalleled scope and would realise the old Russian dream of extending the empire to the Indian Ocean—without military means (Baumer, 2018, p. 297). The Chinese naval/military presence next to the Persian Gulf on the Pakistani coastline and by implication in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean, at Djibouti in Africa and in Cambodia is a meaningful power projection. A misleading report published by the *Financial Times* (Russell & Jilani, 2025) attempted to cause

rupture in the Sino-Pak relationship. It also indicated concerns over Chinese development of Gwadar Port. More interesting will be a Russian naval-base on the Pakistani coastline allowing Russia to play the New Great Game in the Indian Ocean. It will likewise strengthen efforts by Pakistan and Russia to forge a new strategic partnership for 21st century and beyond. The 10th Pakistan-Russia Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation meeting in Islamabad indicated growing relationship between the two countries (Kiani, 2025). An oil-sector agreement between Russia and Pakistan is a matter of time (Pakistan and Russia exploring oil deal, says Aurangzeb, 2025). The upward trajectory manifests itself. Pakistan needs to take an interest based approach, make bold and calculated decisions, for courage is central to foreign policy decision making. Russians also have bases in the Eastern Mediterranean where empires rise and fall. The new Sino-Russian relationship is a no limit partnership and Pakistan should be part of it.

Moreover, the only country with a financial capacity to fund Syrian reconstruction is China. Chinese have huge economic stakes in Syria, for before the civil war, Syria acted as a wholesale trading hub for the Chinese products (Anderson, 2018). The Chinese attention is on connecting countries by exporting and financing infrastructure through loans plus the product based industrial investments. In September 2013, President Xi in a speech in Kazakhstan said: “The Silk Road Economic Belt focuses on bringing together China, Central Asia, Russia and Europe, linking China with the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central Asia and the Indian Ocean”. Albeit the new cooperation deal between China and Russia to develop the Northern Sea Route (NSR) through the Arctic Ocean, a shorter route between East Asia and Northern Europe which also bypasses checkpoints and challenges of the Indian Ocean trade routes, notably, the end-game of the New Great Game will take place in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean—the world’s third-largest body of water—already forms centre stage for the challenges of the twenty-first century (Kaplan, 2009, p. 17). It is Wei-qi vs Chess. Chinese strategists work for strategic advantage, whereas, Americans seek decisive victory. The expansion of Chinese financial and political influence in South, South West, Central Asia and Africa are indicators, compared to the US failures in Afghanistan, Iraq and the broader Middle East. The boldest moves for world domination in modern history petered-out after two decades of War on Terror in the Greater Middle East.

The shift of focus took place. The great power competition has arrived. An intelligence based escalation in Central Asia is an American option for great and nuclear powers do not attack each other conventionally. The sub-conventional, as part of Hybrid War, is now strategy-cum-tactics. On the other hand, a neo-Clausewitzian attack on Iran by the United States and Israel further destabilized the already destabilized South and South West Asia and the Greater Middle East. The CARs stability too is at stake owing to the Caspian and linguistic-cultural connections of Iran with Central Asia. A war will jeopardize 2011 Ashgabat Agreement that enables transportation between CARs and Persian Gulf and includes Uzbekistan, Oman, Iran, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, and India (Hashimova, 2020). Other than the Israeli-American-Iranian problems rooted in history, an important aspect is the southern route of the Chinese BRI, which if disrupted or destroyed in an Israeli-American war with Iran will badly strangle Chinese ambitions. The southern route from the political point of view is strategically the most important one, because, it touches all five CARs and continues via Iran, Turkey, Bulgaria,

Romania, Ukraine and from there via Belarus, Poland, and Germany to Rotterdam (Xinhua, 2016). Moreover, Russia will not give up on Iran under pressure from America. Iran sits in the middle of north-south corridor which is Russia's main trade corridor for the future. Russia has reportedly started exporting fuel to Afghanistan via Iran through the north-south corridor. And Iran also sits in the middle of east-west corridor which is basically the Central Asian corridor. It is in the self-interest of Russia to connect with Iran and not some willy-nilly concert of states.

Similarly, the first Chinese goods train from Yiwu in China reached Barking Station in London, UK in 2018. The Chinese Railway is now strategic delivering finished products to Europe and transporting back BMWs, Mercs and Audis plus the European wines for the rich consumers in China. And Chinese have invested billions of dollars in CARs to explore oil and gas and build roads and railway infrastructure for trade, commerce and transportation of natural resources to feed industries to produce finished products. The economic rise of China demands a trans-continental foreign policy backed by naval and air power to protect Chinese trade and commercial interests. The strategic Chinese intervention in the May 2025 Indo-Pak clashes is an indicator. The realists interpret—and predict—China's behaviour as intended to regain supremacy in Asia, and ultimately to challenge the United States for global leadership (Finger, 2016, p. 2). The Sino-American competition is for the domination of global strategic environment in the context of strategy, culture, natural resources, trade and technology. The rise of Chinese neo-Clausewitzian, Clausewitzian, nuclear and naval power indicates.

CONCLUSION

The strategic management of the Eurasian and Central Asian strategic environments is Sino-Russian and CARs litmus test, as opposed to the US options. It is harmonizing of great powers and CARs interests. The decisions and decision-making processes are critical. The grey area competitive uncertainty is a new experience in statecraft for the leaders of CARs, compared to the certainty of Soviet era. And living through an uncertainty is the real game in diplomacy. The CARs advantage is the authoritarian form of governance and decision making that has worked well so far. Still, CARs need to open their economies, work towards establishing capital markets, financial sector and large-scale manufacturing sectors. The CARs in the context can learn from emerging markets like Türkiye. It will also have to deal with the enacting of new laws in the execution of BRI projects, the regulation of the MNCs and the International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) fostering colour revolutions in Eurasia. The failed coloured revolutions in CARs involved INGOs and western embassies, as it was in Ukraine, Syria and Libya. The required shift of focus for the CARs is towards bilateral and multi-lateral economic partnerships, as opposed to territorial and other disputes.

The future of CARs depends on the capacity and ability of the leadership to effectively manage a harmonious balance between China and Russia, and to ameliorate the lot of its citizens through a people-centred development. The good-luck of CARs is that both China and Russia between themselves are not playing winner takes all game. There is this harmonious convergence between the ancient Chinese wisdom and the centuries old Russian statecraft. Globally, China has emerged as the captain of free-trade. The BRI is an idea fundamental to which is the initial Eurasian economic connectivity through infrastructure, and then integrating Eurasia through trade,

commerce and security cooperation. The world may soon find China deploying alternative financial system to the American SWIFT in Central Asia and other regions of the world. American foreign policy on its part has lost to Russia in Ukraine, and to China in Afghanistan, South and Central Asia. Still, all the great powers i.e., America, China, Russia, India, European Union (EU) and MNCs are present in Central Asia and competing with each other for the control of natural resources. The CARs are poised and can make an escape from its isolation—since the fall of Mongol Empire—through an act of imagination. For, central to leadership is imagination and establishing linkages and connections. Management is nothing but decision making. The more imaginative, the less troubling.

The post-9/11 American military presence in Central Asia has been replaced with the Russian geo-strategic and Chinese geo-economic and geo-political presence. The Sino-Russian integration of policies and strategies is impacting the CARs strategic environment. The Sino-Russian inroads in case of Afghanistan are indicators of an altered strategic environment. An example is the emergence of SCO as an alliance with Central Asia at the heart of it. China, Russia, Pakistan, India and CARs are full-members with Afghanistan, Iran, Belarus and Mongolia as observers. The Indian presence as a full-member in the SCO is an interesting reality in the sense that India wants to have best of all the worlds. This is not possible in the Real World of statecraft and international politics. The Russian perception was that India was moving closer to the United States of America, whereas, the Central Asian awareness too was not sure of Indian perception. However, the downward slide in the Indo-US relationship altered these perceptions. And though the Sino-Indian annual trade is \$100 billion, the border-dispute and the power-struggle remains, let alone the Indo-Pak rows. An element of uncertainty persists with regard to India in Asia generally and Central Asia particularly. All are pursuing their structural-frameworks in Central Asia that include: American Silk Road announced in 2011, Russian Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) declared in 2012, the Indian Connect Central Asia stated in 2012 and the BRI confirmed in 2013.

The ambitions of European Union (EU) in Central Asia are no less than any other great power. The European soft-power as opposed to the American and Russian hard-power is the main foreign policy instrument of the EU. The Chinese so far are leading in the context of competitive integration of Central Asia. Yet, there is a situation and an interesting one. It is faltering. It is curious. Diplomatically, it is an epistemological puzzle; whereas, strategically it is murky and uncertain. The things have gone wrong in Afghanistan and Iraq, let alone Gaza, Libya and Yemen. This advances Central Asia as an alternative to the chaos of the Middle East. There are two strategic routes to Central Asia i.e., the northern and the southern. And whereas the northern route is controlled by Russia, Gwadar in Pakistan's Balochistan is the start point of southern route to Central Asia, which is once again the *Historical Pivot* and *Heartland* to the *World Island*. It remains inaccessible to sea powers. The game over Gwadar is about access to Central Asia. The extension of CPEC to Afghanistan will bring Afghans too into the fold of BRI impacting the strategic environment positively in South and Central Asia. The ambiance of the strategic environment of the unfolding century is an unsettled one by the rules of chess and Wei qi. The historians of the 22nd century will be better placed to reflect on the histrionics of the 21st century for the reasons of history.

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