

21st Century Great Game and its Actors: India's Interests in Central Asia and its Repercussions in South Asia

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Abstract— In 2012 June India launched a “Connect Central Asia” policy which embodies India’s ardent concern over Central Asian states. This paper will show how this policy would undermine the regional stability of South Asia since Pakistan’s natural fear on Indian involvement in Central Asian region. Robert D. Kaplan points out that India’s history is the story of invasions from a north-westerly direction. Under these circumstances troubled in Central Asia, Afghanistan has become a crucial strategic point for New Delhi. The literature review of the papers is based on the subject matter and this paper will ultimately trace a comprehensive analysis on the repercussion of rising Indian role in Central Asia and how it would create a new “Great Game” in the region.

Keywords-Central Asia, Great Game, India, Pakistan

I. INTRODUCTION

For many of the readers who have read Rudyard Kipling’s “Kim”, word “Great Game” provides a sense of nostalgia which reminds of the historic encounter took place during the British Raj in later part of 19th century and early 20th century. The Anglo Russian rivalry over the hegemony of Central Asia created a storm in tea cup from late 19th Century to early 20th Century which officially ended in 1917. In the days of East India Company in India, British interests were purely confined to financial based such as opium industry and many of the British officials saw the Imperial Russian presence in Caucasus and Central Asia as a threat for their dominance in the region. Peter Hopkirk has aptly described the nature of the rivalry between Imperial Russia and British over Central Asian region and he further argues how British East India Company used its officers to explore the way to borders in Northern India and manipulate the local tribes. Especially the geographic uniqueness of Central Asia and its strategic position as a buffer zone stimulated both British and Russian interests to stay tune to the game. However as Peter Hopkirk coins in his book “The Great Game-On Secret Service in High Asia” the phase of the rivalry between two nations came to a diplomatic end when Anglo-Russian Treaty in 1907, but even after that the “New Great Game” epoch began to loom as a crucial factor in early 20th Century politics. During this period British paid a heavy concern over Russian activities in Central Asian region, because British

felt the Imperial Tsarist Russia would one day go for an onslaught to India by using Central Asia as a passage and that assumption had feared the English bureaucratic mind since India happened to be the glorious jewel of the Empire. As the old Gibbonian quote goes on “History is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of the mankind” this colonial memory of “Great Game” has been reawaken from its slumber in the history and today in the 21st century the “New Great Game” narrates a different story through its age long historic saga in Central Asia.

II. NATURE OF NEW GREAT GAME IN 21ST CENTURY

Unlike its old type the nature of Great Game has been changed with many ups and downs occurred in the past century. Especially it is important to trace the historic events which took place after the British departure from the region, because the understanding cold war context is highly necessary to understand the nature and players of “New Great Game” in 21st Century. When British took off the Union Jack from India, they did it with creating two nation’s states in the sub-continent called India and Pakistan. Post India’s relationship with Central Asia was highly nurtured by New Delhi’s closeness with Kremlin and it played a crucial in Indian attitude towards the region. Historically India’s past has been intertwined with Central Asia since the day of yore. For an instance, land silk route used to be an important line of diplomacy in the past where not only trade took place, but many of the intellectual ideas, war strategies were exchanged. This geographic intimacy between the two regions began to sharpen after British left from the region. But it never took place in a rapid manner, instead of India’s presence in Central Asia developed under the Soviet influence till the collapse of USSR in 1991. After its defeat by Chinese in Indo-Sino war in 1961, India realized the importance of keeping its hawk eye on Central Asia, because the unique geographic position of Central Asia could have made pivotal impacts in Indian soil. However the necessity of playing a “New Great Game” never emerged till the beginning of present century and Indian power was not in a highest position in world politics, but the collapse of Soviet Union and Delhi’s favorable attitude towards Washington had played the cards of the game. It is a fact beyond dispute the USA has shown a pragmatically

positive attitude towards Indian power in South Asian region recently. International Relations scholar Ivan Campbell argues that by allowing India to expand its wings around Central Asia, Washington eventually expects to implement a strategy that this New Silk Road would link India with Central Asia and then it will be a path to the west. The US involvement in the region was highly galvanized by its operation in Afghanistan after September 11 attacks; it finally set up the ground for the US to enter, but its interests in the Central Asian affair is highly under covered by the Indian presence. According to Stephan 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". For many Security strategists this a scrumptious game played by the USA after using India as its proxy. Nevertheless the motives of Indian desire over its "near abroad" has deeply upset India's biggest nemesis in South Asia, Pakistan and also the Chinese too feel quite uneasy before this new "Great Game" of the 21st Century. By looking at the nature, it becomes a palpable fact to realize that unlike the old "Great Game" of the British Raj, this wouldn't be an old fashioned game between two parties. But the contemporary political context in Central Asia and the world has completely changed its nature.

A. It's Actors and Their Roles

Robert De Kaplan states in his writing that India's history is the "story of invasions from a North-Westerly direction", under this circumstance for philistine Indian eyes Central Asia becomes a source of threats than opportunities. It is a known factor that after the humiliating defeat by Chinese in 1962, Indian-China relationship continues doldrums and both countries have adopted a skeptical attitude towards each country. When looking at the annals of history, it is a pretty interesting factor to recognize that Indian interests in Central Asia was relatively less before the collapse of Soviet Union and the region was shadowed by Russians as it used to be in the 19th Century. But the in the advent of post-cold war era both the Indian and Chinese interests of Central Asia sprang out and especially both the cultures do share various affinities towards Central Asia. When it comes to Afghanistan and Iran, India does have a closer role and China has its odds from the remote Central Asian states like Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan. Besides having such socio cultural affiliations with China and India, it is a pivotal fact to remember that in this 21st Century Great Game no Central Asian state is expected to play the role of a "Pawn". But they rather are independent actors that have a narrow margin to maneuver against their Russian, Chinese and Indian neighbours but are still independent in their foreign policy decisions. More importantly Central Asian states do not have same allegiance to either China or India, it differs from the above mentioned socio cultural affiliations. However, despite its blooming importance Central Asia continues to be a peripheral region in terms of security. For China the stability of Turkmenistan will be extremely important with the growing unrest in Xinjiang and on the contrary the Afghan peace becomes more relevant with India to keep

its thumb in Kashmir from Islam extremism. Both countries have been grappling with the Islamic extremism in certain ways and it creates a heavy concern over the security in Central Asia. Afghanistan remains the fragile state in Central Asia which has so many security loopholes and especially its instability became worsen after the NATO departure from Afghanistan in 2014. Ostensibly security matters a lot for India to work with the Central Asian region.

Apart from the security concern it is clear enough the other interests loom before the region and actors of the "New Great Game" have set up themselves to play the uncanny game. In 21st Century energy security has become a paramount fact in deciding the power of a nation state. Securing an assured and uninterrupted supply of energy is must for India's economic wheels in motion. According to the current data analysis India's present energy sources are mainly coming from abroad, especially from the "chop and changed" Middle East region. Central Asia has god given richness in natural resources and Caspian Sea grants off shore hydro carbon to the region. 4 percent of natural gas and 3 present of the world oil reserves have confined within this part of the world. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan possess most of these resources. Being a nuclear power India strives to increase its uranium assets and Central Asia provides a fabulous space for such a task. For an instance India owned Oil and Natural Gas Cooperation (ONGS) has planned to invest in Kazakhstan, which possess the world most fertile oil fields. Ironically India is not the only actor who shows an ardent interest in the rich energy resources of the Central Asian region. China too has a flare over the energy sources in Central Asia and Chinese have been investing in the region by keeping a good tally with India.

In order to keep the good faith many of the Central Asian states attempt to uphold a cordial relationship with both the countries, but factually each one has its own allegiances. As the given paragraph mentioned both China and India having their own cards in the region and geo political security and energy security have become the larger ostensible interests in India and China. But it is not a prudent fact to isolate "New Great Game" as a geo political encounter between two emerging super powers, because by looking at the depth of the game one could see the spider web of Great Game has crossed the Atlantic Ocean and penetrated the walls of White House.

B. Geopolitical Relations of India in "New Great Game"

International Relations analyst Ivan Campbell has pointed out in a magazine which was published in 2013 October how India has started its recent developments in Central Asian region through strengthening the formal foreign relationship. It was in 2012 January that New Delhi launched its "Connect Central Asian Policy", this intended to build a stable and strong relationship with India and the fellow states in Central Asia. Campbell argues the ulterior motive of creating such a harmonized stability meant for a

wave of expansion of Indian influence over Central Asia, eventually it would seek fortune for India such as supplying energy security as well as India investments in Central Asia would tie Indian influence over the region. Moreover the geopolitical relations between India and other states in South Asia, especially Afghanistan and Pakistan will become more significant regarding deciding the nature of "New Great Game".

It is not an exaggeration to mention the fact that existence of Pakistan always has been the nemesis of modern Indian history. These two nations have fought three times with each other and India's access to Central Asia becomes trivial, because Pakistan's geography always hinders direct India approach to the region. On the other hand the much troubled state in Central Asia, Afghanistan plays a crucial role in this context. For some Indian minds still Afghanistan is an integral part of the Indian subcontinent, but its instability always has shocked the policy makers in New Delhi, because if Afghanistan's rule again falls back to Taliban or any other Islamic militia, it would be a severe blow on India's national interests. However in the recent past India has shown a progressive interest in Afghanistan's politics, even in the previous government of Karzai and current rule of president Ghani. In the point of matter India now strongly back the rule in Kabul as a bulwark against Pakistan as India used to be during Najibulla's era. By looking at Indian factor in the politics of Afghanistan one cannot forget the US recent past with the same country. Present circumstances are clear enough to understand that Washington expects New Delhi to play the Viceroy's role in Afghanistan after the departure of American military in the region. US international relations analyst Robert D Kaplan has aptly shown the new American interest in India to play a larger role in the Central Asia. He states "As the USA and China become the great power rivals, the direction in which India tilts could determine the course of geopolitics of Eurasia in the 21st Century. India and other words loom as the ultimate pivot state". But this Indo American alliance in the 21st century Central Asian politics leads to a further chaotic situation in Pakistan, which used to be the strongest ally in South Asia for the US, when New Delhi dined with Kremlin in the period of Cold War. The inevitable outcome of such an alliance is Pakistan is approaching more towards the China. The recent Chinese involvement in establishing China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a reflection of this scenario. There is no doubt this China's new Silk Road will rapidly alter the regional dynamics of trade, developments and politics.

C. Repercussions in South Asia

India's new interest in the Geopolitics of Central Asia has longer consequences in South Asian politics. Being the key access to South Asia Central Asian region has a greater importance in South Asia despite its number of socio cultural differences. Especially the relevance of the context has to be understood according to the hegemonic role played by India in South Asia. It is a fact beyond

dispute that India has improved a tremendous political and economic strength in the recent past and especially its ties with the USA makes ponderable impacts in the regional affairs. Once Undersecretary to the US State Department Nicholas Burns predicted "Within a generation many Americans may view India as one of our two or three strategic partners" This new tendency has critically changed the fate of South Asia today and "New Great Game" looms as a new dimension of Indo-American alliance. The first half of this paper has dealt with the question how American attempt to meddle with the "Geo Politics" of Central Asia through using India as its proxy, and it is certain enough that such a companionship in Central Asia will make Chinese uneasy, at the same time it can boomerang upon India in South Asia as a form of Chinese- Pakistan axis. As this paper illustrated Chinese will use states in South Asia to hinder Indian plan to approach Central Asia and in such an event Pakistan will be an ideal ground for Chinese. Moreover it further tries to expand its stable relationships with Nepal and other South Asian countries, in such an event India will get encircled by pro Chinese states in the home ground. For both the states do have a civilizational romance with the Central Asia with its old myth called "Silk Route", which had left many influence over the history of both countries. Under these circumstances China will continue a mechanism to pressurize India from South Asian block to Prevent Indian power rise in Central Asia. Staunch Chinese involvement in Pakistan and Nepal could be taken as ideal examples to prove this contention. Moreover China shows an interest in the maritime activities in the Indian Ocean, especially during the regime of Mahinda Rajapakshe of Sri Lanka, China involved in serious projects in Sri Lanka to revive the "Maritime Silk Route" in Indian Ocean by investigating a huge amount of finance over constructing Hambatota International harbor in the Deep South part of Sri Lanka. Indian International Relations analyst N. Manoharan argues "If China wishes it can always turn these projects to India's disadvantage in a conflict situation". These factual circumstances are enough to assume that India's interest in Central Asia can boomerang upon them in the home ground because Chinese becomes more sceptical on India's presence in Central Asia and then in order to balance the situation they would befriend with all India neighbours and it will spontaneously lead to a greater power imbalance in the region. On the other hand the U.S concerns about the rise of Chinese power in the Central Asia as a ponderable factor in their diplomacy. The scale of potential Chinese investments projects in Central Asia betrays an ambition for expanded economic influence over the region. It was in 2013 that Beijing declared they would provide \$64 Billion in infrastructure deals in the region. These plans were followed in 2015 by Chinese president Xi Jinping's announcement of the ambitious Silk Road Economic belt initiative, also many Western scholars have already predicted the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which comprises China, Russia and all the states of Central Asia except Turkmenistan has credible potential to become a powerful regional entity

like European Union in the coming years. By nature the U.S is reluctant to bear such a situation and it has been evident its recent policy changes towards Central Asia that Washington will succour and accept Indian presence in Central Asia as a strategy against China. But its longer consequences will last for a long time while making a political unrest in South Asia.

III.CONCLUSION

This paper has traced the historic analogy of 21st Century 'Great Game' since its inception of the post-cold war era. India's new approach towards Central Asia CCAP has more expectations such as energy security, geographic strategies etc. However New Delhi's launched campaign on Central Asia in 2012 will envisage many challenges to implement in Central Asian soil as this paper pointed out in the above mentioned arguments. The eccentric nature of this "New Great Game" is unlike its old model which existed between the British raj and Tsarist Russia; the new encounter will entangle number of states together in action, as Marlene Laruelle rightly pointed out "The fellow states of Central Asia will not play the role of mere Pawn States. They rather be actors in the game". The question arises when India tightens her role in such a fervent manner in Central Asia, its repercussions can penetrate the boundaries of South Asia too. As this paper has analysed Indo American affinity with regard to the spreading influence in Central Asia can always create a clamour in Chinese psyche and in order to prevent further Indian expansion near their home frontier China will increase its cooperation with Indian neighbours strongly, ultimately this dilemma of power lead to an inevitable regional crisis of South Asia. As Chanakya aptly said in his famous treaties on state craft it is always the failure of diplomacy which leads to the war. This maxim is heavily applicable to the context in Central Asia. In the grand old days of old "Great Game" in the Raj, Anglo-Russian rivalry was all the time tamed by the good diplomacy and mutual negotiations and it is still early enough to predict the outcome of the "New Great Game" in 21st Century.

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