

PART-B

1 CHAPTER

India and Central Asia Policy—Key Drivers of the Relationship

After reading the chapter, the reader will be able to develop an analytical understanding on the following:

- Background of Central Asia
- Strategic Interests of India in Central Asia
- Strategic Interests of other players in Central Asia
- Challenges faced by India in Central Asia

BACKGROUND OF CENTRAL ASIA (CA)

The background of CA is crucial to understand how India engages with the region. Below I provide a brief account of the history of CA. The history is divided in two parts.

PART-A: FROM THE SILK ROAD TO THE GREAT GAME

CA has always been a prized territory. The history of CA is a testimony to this fact. The importance of the region has been highlighted by the mighty empires of Genghis Khan, Timur Beg and Alexander of Macedonia. In the early Christian era, CA oversaw a magnificent ancient Silk Route. This Silk Route connected the Far East with Europe Silk Route and was dominated by the Chinese. The Chinese influence in the region began to decline by 6th and 7th Century when Islam made inroads into CA from the Arab world. However, even with the Chinese influence in the region in the decline, silkworm agriculture in the Fergana Valley continued. Arabs took over the trade along the Silk Route, Silk Route which now entered a new cultural arena. The region saw the rise of powerful Persian and Turkic empires. The cultural legacy of these two mega empires is visible in the region till today.

The picture in the modern times is relatively different. In 18th and 19th century, the CA region witnessed annexation by the Tsar (monarch) of Russia. One reason why the Tsar was worried about the regions in the south was because of the British Empire in India. The British in India had been very aggressively undertaking consolidation. The Tsar became concerned about the security of his own empire. Thus, for Russian Tsar, the most immediate goal was to ensure that Afghanistan should not fall into the hands of the British. In order to ensure this, Russia began to consolidate its position in CA. In 1865, Russia completed the annexation of Tashkent city and by 1881, the Tsar had consolidated his presence in trans-Caspian region. The competition between the Tsar and British was so intense that CA was actually transformed into a buffer by Russia to use against the British.

Meanwhile, the British also became increasingly uncomfortable and insecure due to the Tsar's aggressive influence. The British perceived the expansionist agenda of Tsar as a potential future threat to their own empire in India. The British fought multiple Anglo-Afghan wars to establish control over Afghanistan. In the process, in the modern times, Afghanistan and CA both unwittingly became buffer states. The British carried out the establishment of a boundary in Afghanistan to keep a check on Russian influence. This boundary, called the Wakhan corridor, created acted as buffer. This entire scenario of the Anglo-Russian rivalry in the region has been termed by historians as The Great Game of CA. Thus, the origin of the Great Game goes back to the 19th Century when the Russians advanced to the region of CA and Caucasus, which was perceived by the British as a threat. The British responded to resist the influence of Russia by establishing a huge network of agents in the frontier areas to gather intelligence against the Russians. The British even tried to make Afghanistan a buffer state, though remained largely unsuccessful. The importance of CA for the British increased in 1904 when Harold Mackinder published an article observing that if Russia is able to position itself in the Eurasian heartland, it would gain power to pivot the region to emerge as a world power.



Theory and Practice of Soviet Rule in CA During Cold War

From 1865 to 1918, CA was under the Russian rule as a colony of Russia. In the inter-war period, as the Red Army became more assertive, CA came under the direct rule of the Soviets. Scholars have often tried to compare the colonisation of Europe with Soviet rule of CA and have asserted that the Soviet rule of CA cannot be compared with exploitative colonialism practices by other European powers. This is so because the Soviet rule in CA saw Soviets investing heavily into education and electricity in CA. The scholars have asserted that the Soviet rule in practice was a mixture of imperialism and state building. Francine Hirsch in his study *Empire of Nations* asserts that Soviets did not follow the simple divide and rule logic, as other imperial powers, in CA. The Soviets introduced industrialisation of CA apart from applying colonial patterns for cotton and energy resources. Oksana Dmitrieva asserts that Soviet-CA relationship is a unique case with no parallel in the world. The CA states were aptly called as patrimonial states (Alexander Cooley) where Soviet maintained authority by giving resources to regional and sub-regional informal institutions (like clan etc.). Such institutions worked so well that even when Gorbachev introduced Glasnost and Perestroika, there were hardly any mass uprisings on the ground. The end of the Cold War saw the CA states transform into now Republics with authoritarian rulers. An immediate absence of interest of any Great Power created new spaces for new ideas. The West led civil society organizations promoted pluralism and market economy while Saudi Arabia initiated the spread of Wahhabism. CA eventually became a new space for propagation of religious agendas. As Russia struggled with its domestic issues, in the post Cold War period, China focused its energies through Shanghai-5 to conclude the pending border disputes with CA. USA, though was interested in promoting NATO in the post-Soviet sphere, but, decided to refrain from the

same in CA. Despite all this, due to the deep entrenchment of Russia during Cold War; in the Post Cold War period, it still remained the major actor by default.

PART-B: FROM THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION TO THE REVIVAL OF THE NEW GREAT GAME

As noted above, at the end of the Cold War, CA states adopted authoritarianism. The states have established complete authority over their media and domestic security structures to ensure that there is no threat to the authority of the one party patrimonial rule. In all the CA states, the opposition is in exile and all threats to the authority are well conflated. Post 9/11, CA became a new hub for the USA's Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). USA concluded fresh flying and refuelling agreements with CA. This gave the CA states new platform to assert their authority by asserting their local rules. The CA states did cooperate with USA but also asserted their dominance by limiting the influence of USA to seek political reforms domestically. The old Great Game got revived once again and was now played, post 9/11, between USA, China and Russia as new actors. Today CA is an area of high geopolitics as great powers try to buy local loyalties of CA states with an intention to block their rivals to gain any geopolitical significance.

Background of India's Relations with CA

India's relations with CA go back to the ancient times. A study of the site of Altyn-Depe, a Bronze age site in Turkmenistan, also proves that Harappa did have interactions with CA as some artefacts of the late Harrapan stage were found at the site. In the 2nd century BC, Aryans from CA began to migrate towards India, and took along with them domesticated breeds of horses. During early ancient and medieval times, it was the Silk Route that connected India with the region. The Silk Route had three branches—the north, south and central. It is the southern branch of the Silk Route that connected CA with India. Thus, the Indian subcontinent was connected with China on one side and to CA on the other side. From the first and second century BCE, we see the major tribal nomadic groups moving via the Silk Route to reach India. Over a period of time, at later stages, through this route came the Sakas, the Parthians and the Kushanas. The Kushanas established a very strong and unified kingdom under them, including large parts of the northern Indian territory. The Kushanas also patronised Buddhism which not only flourished under their rule but also reached other territories like China and CA under their patronage. The cultural impact of Buddhism in the region can still be seen today. The ancient Silk Route thus contributed to cultural exchange and introduced varied elements of other cultures in the Indian subcontinent.



In Persia, during the medieval ages, the great Sasanian empire was the last empire to thrive before the rise of Islam. The trade on the Silk Route in the medieval times began to decline. The Sasanian Empire continued its hostility towards the Romans, and thus, the focus on trade dwindled away. During the medieval times, Islam gradually came to be firmly rooted in CA. Islam also gradually began to trickle into India. This gradual movement of Islam in India did provide an impetus to trade but it never quite reached the same magnitude as that of the ancient times. Indians exported cotton, shawls, dyes and ayurvedic medicine to the region while it imported horses, gold and dry fruits. This revival of trade also established a small segment of the Indian diaspora in CA during the medieval times. Towards the middle of the medieval period, maritime trade with Europe began. The Europeans began to trade with the Far East. During this time period, the Muslims and Persians resorted to strengthening their control over land trade as Europeans began to consolidate maritime trade.



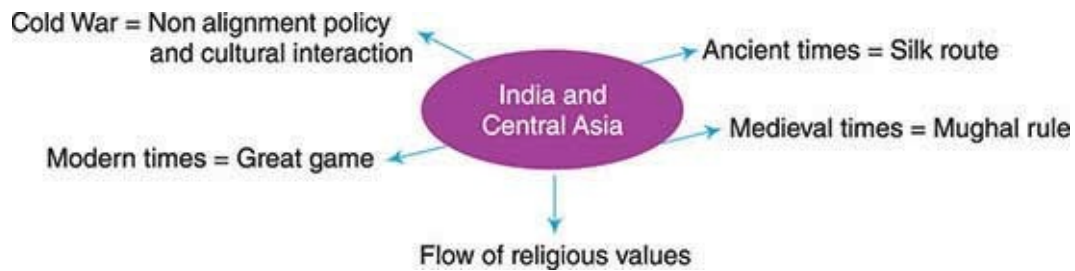
Economic Contributions of the Silk Route to India

The Silk Route brought about a significant transformation in the economic architecture of India. The most visible contribution could be seen in the Kashmir region. From ancient to medieval times, a lot of craftsmen migrated from CA to India and settled down in the region. The craftsmen began to practise embroidery and shared the technology with locals. Over a period of time, the Kashmir region gained prominence in making shawls. Even today, Kashmir continues to dominate shawl trade in India. Irfan Habib, in his book *A People's History of India: Technology in Medieval India, C. 650–1750*, also says that Noria, an ancient water wheel for irrigation which pumped water out of a river, came to India via the Silk Route.

As the Mughal Empire in India began to crumble, India slipped into the hands of the British. On the other hand, the CA region came under the influence of the Tsar of Russia. The British and Russian rivalry led to the unfolding of the Great Game in three different phases. The Russian Tsar had an expansionist outlook but was also concerned about similarly aggressive British expansion in India. In order to keep the British influence in check, the Russian Tsar occupied Tashkent and Khantes. This alarmed the British as to the Tsar's intentions to expand to India, which led them to fight the Anglo Afghan wars. Thus, the first phase of the Great Game oversees the formation of a buffer zone.

The second phase of the Great Game began from 1907 and continued till 1917. This was the time when the buffer areas became grounds for espionage. Agents of Britain and Russia resorted to spying on each other's territories to keep the adversary in check. In the third phase, or the period after 1917, the Russians established a firm control over CA, which gave them access to the vast cotton lands of CA. This land was aggressively used by Russia for sustaining industrial revolution back home. An important thing to note here is that since the time of Tsar of Russia, Russia had gradually come to exert a strong cultural influence in the region. Russians brought along their language while settling in the region and by the advent of modern times, Russian language had become ingrained in Central Asian culture. After the World War–II, Russia or USSR divided the CA region into five states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan) on the

basis of ethnicity, with Moscow controlling the foreign policy of the five states. The USSR did provide India access to CA in the times of the Cold War. India continued to engage with CA through cultural interaction. Indian television and music remained popular in CA during the cold war; however, due to India's non-alignment policy, a very deep relation between India and the Central Asian nations could not evolve.



As the Cold War ended, India evolved a concentric circle approach to foreign policy, whereby it first prioritised engagement with its immediate neighbourhood. At the second level came the extended neighbourhood and last came the great powers. As far as CA was concerned, in the foreign policy pattern, it fitted in the arena of its extended neighbourhood. Thus, CA can be deemed as India's extended neighbour with which India has enjoyed historical and cultural ties.

As the Cold War ended, the five CA Republics gained independence from Russia, giving them the needed strategic and autonomic space to explore relationships with other countries independent of the Russian yoke. India, on the basis of its historical and cultural proximity to CA, now began making overtures again unlock potential alliances. India concluded fresh diplomatic treaties with all the five CA Republics. During the Cold War, the foreign policy of India in CA had been completely directed through the prism of USSR. Finally, at the end of the Cold War, India found the opportunity to engage with the regional states one on one. Domestically, India made a transition from closed to open economy, and also began to feel the need of acquiring resources for sustaining its own economic growth. Thus, CA became all the more significant for India as the region was a highly resource rich one.

But as the CA Republics had just gained independence, one of the foremost concern for India was to ensure that the region should not get engulfed in any form of religious extremism. The threat of religious extremism in CA was very high. During the Cold War period, the USSR and the USA were both engaged in Afghanistan. The territory of Afghanistan saw rise of jihadi elements which were directed against the USSR to contain communism. As the USSR disintegrated, the monetary and arms support to jihadist elements was stopped. There was a high possibility of a spill over of these extremist elements into CA as a majority of the Central Asian states were Islamic. India feared that if CA were to be engulfed by this extremism, it would give Pakistan an edge in maintaining strategic depth against India. Thus, India realised that not only it needed to revive its relations with CA on the basis of historical and cultural linkages but also needed to ensure that the region did not become a security concern for India. India began to realize that its own democracy, secular outlook, and its own multicultural polity are its assets which India can use for promotion in CA as the newly independent Central Asians would look for some role models to emulate. Since CA was a cultural and a religious mosaic of multiple groups, India could use the modalities of democracy, secularism and multiculturalism as core ideals for CA to take lessons from. In 1995, P V Narismha Rao

visited Turkmenistan and reiterated the common cultural legacy of the two nations to re-establish relationships. In his visit to Turkmenistan, Rao unveiled India's Look North policy.



If India were to be able to promote these three goals, not only would it be able to reassert its cultural legacy and re-established its relationship with the Central Asian region, but it would also be able to achieve three core goals.



As time progressed, the security situation in the CA region deteriorated. Afghanistan fell into the hands of the Taliban in 1996. Indian fears were exacerbated as Pakistan recognised Taliban rule in Afghanistan. The extremism from Afghanistan also spilled over into Tajikistan, which saw a civil war take place. From the Pakistani side, there was an aggressive attempt to revive militancy in Kashmir in 1990s. Due to this instability, the immediate neighbours in the region were adversely affected. As the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, India, Russia and Iran supported a group called the Northern Alliance. India built a hospital near the airbase of Farkhor in Tajikistan. The military hospital provided medical assistance to the Northern Alliance. India also used the Ayni air base for the purpose of providing humanitarian assistance and aid. In the process, India-Tajik security co-operations strengthened over bilateral relations. However, as the region was in the grip of extremist forces, assertion of Look North Policy goals became increasingly difficult.

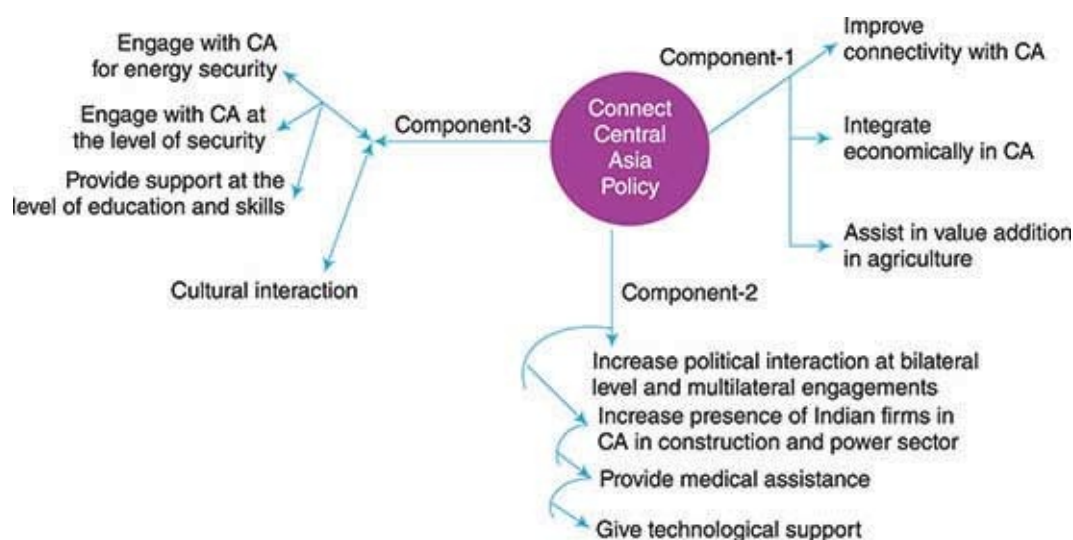
In 1999 India's security vulnerabilities were woefully exposed when IC-814 was hijacked. The situation in the region changed after 9/11. The US invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. The US began to develop airbases and military logistic centres in CA for its global war on terror. India also realised the difficulty in the promotion of the goals planned under the Look North Policy and began to understand that Look North Policy could never be a successful policy to engage with CA. By this time, around 2000–2001, the Indian economy, which had made a transition from a closed to an open economy a decade back had begun to bear fruit. India was in dire need of resources to propel its economic growth. Thus began the search for Indian foreign policy tools which would help it look at CA in a different way.



Why did the Look North Policy Remain Weak?

As outlined above, the deterioration of the security of the region was a colossal concern. The civil war in Tajikistan, the takeover of Afghanistan by Taliban, Pakistan sponsored militancy in Kashmir and support to Taliban were all noteworthy factors. However, many diplomats today agree, that apart from these reasons, India itself did not aggressively prioritise this region at the end of the Cold War. When the Cold War ended, the foremost priority of India was to improve relations with the US to fill the vacuum left by its past proximity to the erstwhile USSR. India also initiated the Look East Policy where the majority of its focus was directed to its Eastern neighbours. India somehow not only neglected to give due attention to CA, but the deteriorating security situation of CA also made India to think of CA from a purely security point of view than from the perspective of any economic significance. Thus, a mixture of all these factors made the implementation of Look North Policy weak.

The presence of US in the region had also changed the regional equalities. The Taliban was defeated by the US and extremism had at least been controlled to a great extent if not wiped out. India's proximity to the US in mid 2000s opened up the way to the nuclear deal in 2005 and NSG-specific waiver for India in 2008 led to a new form of strategic engagement. As the Indian economy began to show signs of growth, India's hunger for resources also began to grow. For India, rebuilding a relationship with CA using different parameters became important. India now realised that in order to get resources from CA, it needed a reorientation of its policy. The new policy had to be based on economic diplomacy. As the region continued to remain fragile, however, India understood that the security component has to remain a part of the new engagement. India also found that the space for economic engagement with CA was very limited by the pre-existing inroads China had made into CA. China had been engaging with CA republics economically since the end of Cold War. Thus, the challenge for India now was to chart out a balanced engagement in CA. In order to do this, the Indian Council of World Affairs undertook a Track-11 initiative called India-CA Dialogue. On 12th June, 2012, the Minister of State for External Affairs of India, during an address (at the first India-CA Dialogue) in the city of Bishkek in Kyrgyz Republic, announced the Connect Central Asia Policy (CCAP). The new policy has the following goals:



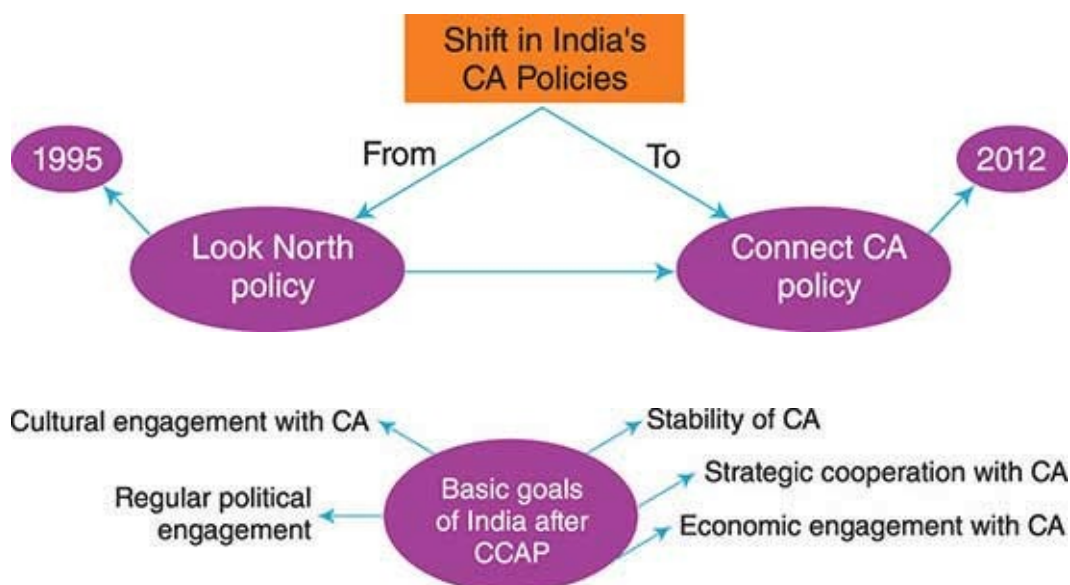
The new CCAP emerged as a very broad policy to re-engage with the region. The main thrust of the CCAP is to increase connectivity with CA for energy security. The International North- South Transit Corridor (INSTC) envisaged is a mega connectivity

initiative to improve connectivity with CA and assist them in their own growth. In this regard, there are multiple initiatives under CCAP. The first initiative at the civilian level envisages youth exchange programmers and India providing training to the youth of CA in IT skills. The second initiative is at the level of military collaboration. There are also provisions for joint exercises and counter terrorism exercises. At the bilateral level, as we shall see ahead, there is also a provision of regular intelligence sharing. The CCAP provides India a broad framework to engage with the region.



India, Central Asia and Culture

The scenic beauty of CA has always attracted the Indian film industry. In 1987, Russia allowed India to be the only non-communist nation to open a mission in Tashkent with a jurisdiction over other CA nations. India used it to promote the festivals of India, and regularly held cultural programmes, music, films and dance festivals in CA. Since the 1950s, Indian films have showcased the scenic beauty of CA to its audience.



STRATEGIC INTEREST OF INDIA IN CA

At the time when the Cold War ended, the Soviet control over CA also ended. The CA republics began to assert independence. India took the lead to forge diplomatic ties with the region. During this time period, two important things happened. Firstly, as discussed in the previous section, the security situation of the region deteriorated. The prime strategic interest of India during this time was to ensure that the region does not slip into religious extremism from deteriorating conditions in Afghanistan. Secondly, the other important thing that happened in the region to CA was the influence of China. As the influence of Russia in CA at the end of the Cold War declined, the Chinese stepped into the shoes of the Russians. Since the Chinese economy had made a transition to an open economy under Deng Xiaoping, it had begun to expand and subsequently faced a crunch of resources. China desperately needed resources to sustain the momentum and finally adopted a plan of action based on a long-term policy. Its policy was to first open up relations with CA and remove all irritants. It would then concentrate on integrating the Chinese economy with

that of CA. It would then take steps to ensure sustained resource supply from the region.

While India was engaged with the Northern Alliance and trying to give effect to its Look North Policy, the Chinese began to resolve border issues with CA. As the borders had acted as irritants, the Chinese not only resolved these issues, but also demilitarised its borders with CA. Next, it began to supply the weak CA economies with domestically manufactured goods. In return, China began to take resources from CA. This cemented Chinese presence in the region.

From 2000 to 2010, India firstly continued to exercise its Look North Policy. As US was unleashing its global war on terror and was curbing extremism and fundamentalism in the region, all regional players like India, China, Russia, and the CA republics supported the US in the endeavour since all of them were affected by extremism. India's strategic interests in the region began to evolve. With the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom by the US in Afghanistan, the US succeeded in removing Taliban. In Afghanistan, a democratic polity was established and Hamid Karzai became the first democratically elected President of Afghanistan. Thanks to US support, India began to play an increasingly important role in the nation-building process of Afghanistan. As Indian presence in Afghanistan increased, India also realised that Afghanistan could act as a bridge to connect India with CA.



INSTC (International North–South Transit Corridor)

It is a multimodal transport network of rail, road and water transport connecting India, Iran and Russia. It was initiated in 2000 and was ratified in 2002. India has been very keen on the INSTC as it will help India in integrating itself deeply in CA without Pakistani logistical support. It also helps India counter the one belt one road initiative of China. The trade costs shall be lowered and it will take less time circumventing many regions along the way. In May, 2013, the Indian shipping and Road Transport Minister signed an MoU with Iran to develop charter ports. The construction of the Chabbar port is a step towards the operationalisation of the INSTC. In September, 2015, at a meeting in Delhi, a legal framework for transit and customs had also been agreed upon. The Indian Foreign Trade Policy 2015–2020 also made a pitch for INSTC.



India realised that Afghanistan and Iran are the two focal points for engagement with CA. Afghanistan has no access to sea, which is where Iran steps into the picture. Afghanistan is a land-locked country. But Iran has access to waters and also borders Afghanistan. Since 2010, India has given effect to the–CCAP to strategically reconnect with CA not only for getting resources to sustain own growth, but also to provide CA with an alternative market to China. Today, Indian strategic interests in CA are as follows:



India and CA–Energy Cooperation, Challenges, and Geopolitics

Since the end of the Cold War, energy security has become a key goal of Indian Foreign Policy and India has realised that the successful development of the Indian economy would depend upon access to reliable energy. CA has gained prominence in Indian energy security policy due to historical ties and geographical proximity. India is exploring options of transporting energy from CA through pipelines. TAPI and IPI pipelines are two projects envisaged (discussed in the subsequent chapters). The pipeline diplomacy has two core challenges. First, India lacks a direct geographical access to CA. Geopolitically; one challenge for India in the pipeline diplomacy arises from the intentions of Russia and USA. The strategy of USA is to ensure that CA remains independent and it intends to support new pipelines that reduce the Russian monopoly on energy resources of CA. On the other hand, Russia wants to maintain its energy superpower status and Russia favours linking of Russian energy policies with the policies of CA as it intends to establish a Eurasian Gas Alliance in the long run. The challenge for India is that how it manages the divergent thinking of Russia and USA with respect to the energy sector of CA. Secondly; the pipelines pass through a volatile territory of Afghanistan and Pakistan before entering India, thereby multiplying the security costs. India, in 2017, has shown interest in the extension of Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline through Ashkelon Eilat segment where the pipeline will transport oil via Turkey to Eilat port in Israel. India plans to ship the oil to Mumbai from Eilat. This segment of the pipeline will cut the time from 40 to 19 days to transport oil.

Final Analysis

CA is important for India at three levels namely—historical, geopolitical and economic. Since the end of the Cold War, CA has emerged as a zone of geopolitical competition by Russia, China, and USA. India and USA have a shared strategic interest of ensuring that CA does not become an area of influence of any one power. The core interest of India is to ensure that CA does not become a part of the Islamic belt spreading radicalism. To ensure this, for India, limiting the influence of Pakistan in CA would remain a core policy objective. At the security level, India would not want Pakistan to use CA as a territory to maintain strategic depth against India. Some of the diplomats, in interview with the author, also assert that India needs to ensure that USA or China also do not use CA as a region to limit the regional influence of India. India has decided to deepen its security cooperation with CA to keep a check on rising narcotic-terrorism as well. To achieve the same, India is

engaging deeply with Tajikistan and Afghanistan to ensure regional stability. In the quest to seek regional stability, India has cooperated with Russia, USA, and Iran. R&AW believes that the key to regional stability of CA lies with Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang Autonomous Region (XAR). India has been engaging with the Uighurs since the ancient times and till 1950's India also had a consulate in Kashgar. Today R&AW has presence in Bishkek, Almaty, and Dushanbe where vital strategic assets have been established to maintain contacts with the Uighurs. This has given India a big leverage to maintain regional stability. Now India has become a member of the SCO. India will now play an important role in stabilizing the region through the SCO. Thus, to conclude, the core goals of India in CA are energy, culture, and prevention of terrorism to India, maintaining regional stability and explore new export markets. To achieve these, India is adopting a two-point strategy. One, it is engaging with each individual CA state under the CCAP and secondly, is cooperating with regional players to enhance its own presence in the region.



India, its Quest for a Northern Strategy and Failure to Understand the 'Local Rules'

India has engaged with CA to keep a check on Pakistan in CA and Afghanistan. Post-1998, India has engaged with CA perceiving the area as an extended neighbour in the north and has used the engagement as a tool for asserting its position as a rising responsible great power. Though India and CA states have some common goals that range from maintaining stability to prevention of rise of militancy, but India has failed to appreciate the 'local rules' of CA (Alexander Cooley). The issue of Ayni air base in the chapter of India-Tajikistan relation's chapter ahead will demonstrate that India received a big blow to its regional dream of base politics. The debacle at Ayni primarily happened due to neglect of local rules by India. The failure to understand the way CA states work (their local rules) has led to failure of assertion of a strategy to assert power. This has prevented India to play a stronger role in CA.

STRATEGIC INTERESTS OF OTHER PLAYERS IN CA

USA and its "Freedom Agenda" to Economic Incentives

The relation of US and CA during the Cold War was limited to educational exchanges and technical assistance for projects. The USA has had two-fold interests in CA. Firstly, when CA became independent of Russian control at the end of the Cold War, the USA had helped integrate CA to Europe. The US thought was dominated by the fact that CA can be an effective route to bypass the gas pipelines in Russia. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline is one such manifestation. Secondly, after 9/11, US has used the geopolitical location of CA to curb extremism by establishing air bases and military logistic bases in the region. The Bush administration favoured strong relations with CA as the region provided the needed access to the US to Afghanistan. The US signed security frameworks with states of CA and also aggressively pushed for domestic political reforms. Though the US has tried to export democracy in the region, it has met with tremendous resistance as witnessed in the Andijon violence in Uzbekistan in 2005 and Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyz Republic. The resentment to interference of USA in domestic issue of CA states led to

eviction of US from the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) base. The US learned a lesson that if it wanted to stay in CA, it had to accept the local rules of CA. The CA states want to preserve their authoritarian regimes. They don't want any power to challenge their domestic power structure. China and Russia too are both comfortable in dealing with such authoritarian regimes and they too would not prefer democracy in CA. Since 2008, the US policy has been not to advise CA states on political matters but continue the security engagement. The opening up of the Northern Distribution Networks (NDN) for withdrawal from Afghanistan has led scholars (Fredrick Starr calls it the Greater Central Asia Project-GCAP of USA) to assert that doing so would be akin to transform the region by reviving the ancient silk road to access Afghanistan. The basic interest of the US is to reduce the influence of China and Russia in CA but it has shown no real interest to assert hegemony in the region. US prefers to engage with India as engaging with India allows US to balance Russia and China.

Russia's Quest for a Privileged Role and Structural Challenges

The Russian interest in the region can be studied through the prism of the Cold War and a vast network of pipelines to supply oil and gas to Europe. For almost a decade after the Cold War ended, Russia remained mired in its own domestic concerns. The absence of a major power player in the region gave China an opportunity to step into the shoes of the Russians during this period. Russia re-emerged as a player after the coming of Vladimir Putin as he began to re-assert authority and aura in the post-Soviet space. After the 9/11, Russia decided to cooperate with USA in the GWOT. Doing so provided Russia an opportunity to enhance its international image in the post-Cold War period. Russia also realized that if USA would knock down Taliban, it would indirectly benefit Russia, as doing so would weaken the terrorists who could create trouble for Russia in Caucasus. Despite a favourable public opinion in Russia about cooperation with USA, the relations began to take a dip when USA began to assert unilateralism (visible in unilateral decisions of the US to initiate the Iraq war and its decision in 2002 to withdraw unilaterally from ABM Treaty) compelling Russia to perceive US as a competitor in the post-Soviet space. Russia, responded to the new competitor through the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), with Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Belarus being its current members and Afghanistan and Serbia being observer states. The CSTO was positioned by Russia as a challenger to the NATO. The economic arm of the CSTO is the Eurasian Economic Community modelled on the lines of EU. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) also provides a similar platform to Russia along with China to keep a check on US influence in CA. Russia certainly does not want US hegemony or interference in CA. After the Andijon Violence in Uzbekistan in 2005, Russia and Uzbekistan concluded a treaty where Russia would provide assistance to Uzbekistan if there were any military aggressions by a third party. This treaty clearly supports the arguments we have evolved for Russian interest in CA. Russia is not interested in reviving its Cold War type rule in CA nor is interested in emulating the French colonial pattern of engagement with Africa but prefers to establish a policy to legalize its regional primacy through CSTO and Eurasian Economic Community. Russia has allowed the states of CA to engage with external powers but is simultaneously cementing its own presence in the region through new blocks. Russia however witnesses a bigger challenge from China than the US in CA. Though initially Russia and China both

decided to cooperate in CA to keep US under check, but Russia was alarmed to see how China flexed its economic muscles to engulf CA into its orbit completely. The rising international profile of the SCO is also frustrating the Russians. A scholar named Stephen Kotkin of Princeton University has asserted that as China is making no compromises in the economic and security agendas of its engagement with CA, there could be a possibility that Russia could emerge as a junior partner of China in the near future. Russia would certainly not like to envisage such a future.

China's Great Leap Westward, Defining a Regional Security Agenda and Splittism Policy

The Chinese follow a very resource-centric policy in CA. However, China also knows that CA is a background for Russian activities, and it therefore cannot assert any hegemony in CA as this may upset Russia. China cooperates with Russia in CA to ensure that Russia is not antagonised. Just as China takes resources from CA, it also does the same from Russia. In 2014, Russia and China signed a long-term gas supply deal. However, the Chinese also have another interest in CA. Way back in 1759, China took over the region of Xinjiang, consisting majorly of ethnic Muslims, and made it a part of China. Since 1759, the ethnic Muslims of Xinjiang, called Uyghur, have resisted Chinese hegemony. In the Inter-War period, the Xinjiang region was called as the East Turkestan Republic (ETR). In 1934, ETR was absorbed by China. The Northern part of the ETR, from 1945-1949 was a satellite area of the Soviets. In 1949, this region too was brought under China and since then China has controlled the region as XAR by following the official doctrine of three inseparable ties. Under the doctrine, China asserts that one minority group cannot live without the other like Han Chinese cannot live without the minorities while minorities cannot live without the Han Chinese. The Chinese government has deliberately increased the population of the Han Chinese in the XAR while using force (the biggest operation being in 1998 under the Strike Hard Campaign) to suppress the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, East Turkestan Liberation Organisation, and Uighur Liberation Organisation. Post-1950s, the Chinese government deliberately increased the presence of ethnic Han Chinese in Xinjiang. This was done to make Han Chinese a majority and Uyghur a minority. This move again met serious resistance from the Uyghurs. After 1979, with the rise of Mujahedeen activity in Afghanistan, the Uyghur resorted to establishing linkages with extremist forces and began to increase violent attacks against Chinese presence in the region. Today, Uyghur militancy remains under control through cooperation with Central Asian states. Xinjiang province is strategically very important for China because it is a testing site for Chinese nuclear weapons. There is an underground nuclear testing facility in Lop Nor. China has also established a base for its nuclear ballistics in Xinjiang. Recent geological surveys have confirmed the presence of oil deposits in the region, making it all the more important for China in the future.

China wants a stable and peaceful CA since it faces trouble in Xinjiang province. The Xinjiang Autonomous Region (XAR) of China borders Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The XAR is a multi-ethnic region having not only the Uighurs but also 55 other ethnic groups. Uyghur militancy in China is a form of Islamic extremism. China understands that an unstable CA can cause a stir in the Uyghur militancy, which will, in turn, destabilize China. Thus, China seeks to neutralise these threats under the umbrella of

SCO. China has also initiated a Go West campaign also known as the Great West Development Programme to modernize XAR. The states of CA remain crucial in the Go West campaign and to contain the three evils. CA, post 2005, once again emerged as a zone of competition. China also is not comfortable in directly working with the West in Afghanistan and has adopted a hedging strategy. China has developed proximity with ISI of Pakistan and through ISI is in indirect touch with the Taliban. This indirect route to reach Taliban gives China a security guarantee of its investments in Afghanistan and a tool to prevent Taliban to play mischief in XAR. CA has emerged as an area of the new Great Game. Publicly US asserts that CA is not the zone of influence of Russia but behind the scene, it has acknowledged to Russia that Russia has ambitions in CA. China has publicly stated that CA is the special sphere of influence of Russia but, on the ground it has created its own rules on security and economic engagement. If CA is the backyard of Russia, the Chinese have started to redraw the fences in the backyard.



Why did China Create SCO?

From 1996 to 2001, Shanghai-5 was used as a tool to resolve issues and demilitarise borders. The discussions in the group were fruitful enough leading to the group to announce, in 2000, to enhance the discussions beyond border issues to include issues related to separatism and extremism. This led to a new dialogue on multiple security centric issues under a new rubric called the SCO (established on 15th June, 2001). SCO works on the principle of credit attribution as a tool for self-promotion of the image of the organisation. The 9/11 was a game changer for the SCO and China seeing the new norms established by the GWOT, China conflated the agenda of Uighurs (in XAR) and ETIM with Al-Qaeda. This allowed China to cooperate with USA to make a sovereign issue of Uighurs in Xinjiang a frontline in USA's GWOT. But, China also became fearful of rising USA's presence in CA as it felt that a strong USA in CA could choke off energy supplies to CA. China began to believe that US presence in CA could be permanent and it could be used by the US as a springboard to destabilise XAR. China thought that strong US presence in CA is a tool of US to keep a check on China (through XAR). China responded to US game plan in June 2001 by institutionalising the Shanghai-5 to SCO. In June 2002 annual summit, China proposed the creation of Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) and made it a provision in the charter of the SCO. To ensure that US does not use unilateralism in CA, China, through the Article-2 of the SCO charter asserted that none of the member states of SCO will accept any unilateral interference in internal issues of CA by any external power. In 2005, when Askar Akayev of Kyrgyzstan was ousted by the Tulip revolution, Russia and China perceived such a regime change a handiwork of the CIA of the USA. China perceived that such external sponsored regime changes

and attempts for democratization could act fuel troubles in areas in China witnessing political dissent (namely XAR). The Chinese government even despatched researchers to Kyrgyzstan to study the causes of the Tulip revolution. The 2005 Astana summit of the SCO saw Uzbekistan to evict US from the K2 base (decision taken by Uzbeks on pressure from Russia and China). The US perceived the Uzbek decision as a handiwork of Russia and China to use non-military tools to undermine US policies.



Pakistan and the Torkham Gate, 2016

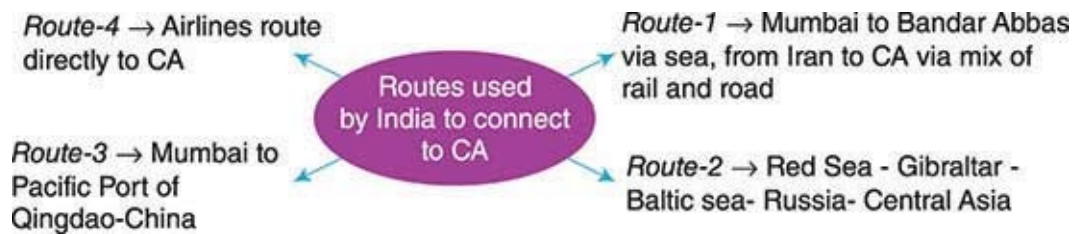
Pakistan is a key player in CA along with Afghanistan. However, Afghanistan and Pakistan have been having a border dispute over the acceptance of the Durand Line since the last 60 years. In June, 2016, Pakistan decided to install a gate at the Torkham border. This gate restricts the entry of people from Pakistan to Afghanistan to reach CA. Such decisions may help Pakistan in the short run, but in the long run, may end up largely isolating Pakistan as it is restricting its own integration with CA. A regional consensus needs to evolve for Central Asia–South Asia (CASA) partnership, of which Pakistan may consider becoming an active member.

CHALLENGES FACED BY INDIA

Apart from the challenges of extremism discussed at length in the previous sections, there are other challenges, like that of diminished trading practices, that the ministry addressed by launching the FOCUS–CIS programme, with specialised attention to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS countries) including Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. Trade has increased with CA due to this programme.



The second challenge is at the level of transport. CA is a landlocked mass. This makes it difficult for CA to connect to international markets as also for India to connect to CA. There is a strongly felt need for land connectivity in CA. The old Silk Route was certainly one option, but the security situation, unresolved border conflicts and prolonged negotiations have compelled India to explore alternative routes to reach CA. India uses these four routes to reach CA at present.



Is Iran the Lynchpin for India in CA?

In 1992–93, in a bilateral meeting, India and Iran established the India–Iran Joint Ministerial Commission, whereby the Indian Commerce ministry agreed to undertake studies to see the feasibility of a route to CA via Iran. Studies found that Iran had a well-defined and established infrastructure in place which could be used for container movement. It had excellent road infrastructure for cargo, a stable law and order system to secure trade and the availability of dedicated freight railway networks. Thus, in 1995, India, Iran and Turkmenistan signed an MoU for rail-road access to CA from India via Iran. Over a period of time, India has invested in the Zaranj–Delaram highway and the International North–South Transit Corridor for engaging with CA via Afghanistan and Iran. There is also CASA–1000 project (Central Asia–South Asia 1000) in which India is not involved. CASA–1000 envisages electricity transmission from Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan by 2018.