

## **Geography and Geopolitics of Turkistan**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The geography and geopolitics of Turkistan are subjects of considerable interest. In the present geopolitical landscape of Inner Asia and Central Asia, it assumes new significance. The present study represents the cultural (ethnic) and political geography of Turkistan. Besides taking stock of ethnicity and geography, this research also evaluates the geopolitical landscape of Turkistan (especially Central Asia) and the factors affecting the stability and instability of the region. It also attempts to locate Turkey in the emerging geopolitics of Turkistan.

**Key Words :** Turkistan, Geopolitics, Transoxiana, Sinkiang or Xinjiang, Central Asia

### **INTRODUCTION**

According to (medieval) Asian history, the regions of Turkistan referred to the vast stretch of land of Inner Asia and Central Asia. It corresponds to the regions of Transoxiana and Sinkiang. It included the land area lying between Siberia (in the north) Tibet, India, Afghanistan and Iran (in the south) the Gobi Desert (in the east) and the Caspian Sea (in the west) (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013). Geo-physically it is bounded by the Caspian Sea, Siberia, Mongolia, Tibet, Hindu Kush and Pamir. It consists of a huge landmass that covers a vast territory of steppes, deserts and mountains. It occupies more space than Western Europe and about half the area of the United States.

For centuries it has remained a distinct geopolitical entity. However, the term Turkistan has been used to define a geocultural region. For all practical purposes, it is a historical and cultural region. It is inhabited by people who have an affinity with the Turkish language. Although it is a multi-cultural region, the dominant languages by which Turkistan (is) was formed are Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Turkmen (Paulo Duarte, 2014). On the other hand, Tajikistan belongs to the people of the Persian language. In fact, 'Turkistan' was a generic term used by medieval Islamic (Persian) writers. The nomenclature of 'Turkistan' was used to distinguish the region of the Turkic speaking people from the Persian speaking people (Millward, 2007). Moreover, the name 'Turkistan' has also been conferred on the basis of history, geography and cultural peculiarities etc., of the region.

#### **Cultural (Ethnic) and Political Geography of Turkistan:**

Historically, this geographical region of Inner Asia and Central Asia was called Turkistan. It is also spelled as Turkestan. The literal translation of Turkistan is 'the land of the Turks' (Encyclopaedia

Britannica, 2013). The 14th century Arab (Moroccan) geographer Ibn Battuta, first used the word to describe the place of Turkic peoples. The legendary European traveller Marco Polo (from Venice, Italy) also described this region with the same name; 'Turkistan'. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the city of Turkestan in the southern Kazakhstan became the most important centre. During the 19th century, in the course of their conquest of Central Asia, the Russians took over the city of Turkistan (in Kazakhstan). Mistaken by its name they designated the entire region (the newly occupied territory) with the name of Turkistan. Consequently, it was adopted by the political scientists and academicians in Europe and Asia.

Physically it had been divided into two parts; Eastern Turkistan and Western Turkistan (Dani and Masson, 1992). Eastern Turkistan refers to the eastern part of the region. It encompasses the land in northwest China, *i.e.*, the territory of Sinkiang or Xinjiang (Paulo Duarte, 2014). It is the region of Kashgar or Xi Yu of Chinese geography. It is also known as Chinese Turkistan. To the Persians, the historical region of Central Asia was known as Turan (opposed to Iran). It corresponds to Western Turkistan. It included three khanates of ancient Central Asia. It comprises of Kokand, Khiva and Bukhara (Paulo Duarte, 2014). It also included the territory inhabited by Turkic peoples (Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Turkmen). Western Turkistan became part of the Russian Empire in 1867. Since then, the land was known as Russian Turkistan. Geographically, the Pamirs separate the two regions.

Geopolitically Turkistan has never been a single political entity. At present also, it includes the countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Xinjiang (western autonomous region of China). The Turkic-speaking people are also spread over a significant area, further into Eurasia. It includes Turkey and the subnational region of Tatarstan in Russia and Crimea in Ukraine. All the people of these areas form Turkic nations. The region is further spread over parts of Afghanistan. Thus, it includes some areas of Afghanistan also.

The history of Turkistan has a great cultural past. The region has remained the area cultural diffusion, as the Silk Road traversed it. Although Islam is the unifying factor in this region, it has remained a great cultural region. Every major religion such as Buddhism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, etc has also flourished in this region. Even today, it is the region where the Chinese, Russian and Turkish 'worlds' meet. It is an area where Chinese beliefs of Confucianism and Daoism meet Mongolian Buddhism and also Islam. It has also remained great centres of sculptures, cave paintings and ceramics. It all has also flourished in this region. It has also played a significant role in the transmission of ideas and innovations across Asia and Europe.

### **Geopolitical History of Turkistan:**

According to the historical narratives the region north of Hindu Kush has its distinct regional identity. This region belongs to the great Mongols. Chinggis Khan ruled this region in the thirteenth century. The empire of Chinggis Khan left the legacy of Turkish languages. According to the historians of that time the Mongols destroyed the centres of Persian and Arabic learning and helped the Turkish languages become dominant in the region (Dani and Masson, 1992). After the death of the Great Khan in 1227, his descendants fail to keep it united. The region remained divided until the emergence of Timur lame. In the middle of the fourteenth century, Timur again united the Turkish tribes to form a united geopolitical whole (Dani and Masson, 1992). Thus, it remained rarely united politically, except the reign of Mongols. After the mid-19th century, much of the region came under Russian rule, either directly or indirectly (Anthony Hyman, 1997).

After the advent of Russians, the region got its real geopolitical shape. Since then, after the Russian conquest the territories of three khanates: Bukhara (the oasis of Zerafshan), Khiva (downstream of the Amur Darya) and Kokand (Fergana Valley) became Russian Turkistan (Paulo Duarte, 2014). On the extreme eastern part of the region, the cities of Kashgar, Yarkand and other areas of eastern Turkistan became part of Chinese Turkistan. Afghan Turkistan comprised lands south of the Amu

Darya. This area was situated north of the Hindu Kush Mountain range (Anthony Hyman, 1997).

The regional commonness of language and historical memory defines this whole region as Turkistan. It has a common historical, cultural and political heritage. This heritage gives Turkistan a spatial and geopolitical identity.

#### **Literature Survey:**

A large number of research material is available on the geography of Central Asia. A large number of books and research articles are also available on the changing geopolitics of Central Asia. Akiner (1994) has presented the civilisational history of the region. He has described the culture, religion and ethnic identity of the region. Hyman (1998) has presented his research on the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent emergence of the Central Asian countries. He has described that since times immemorial, the countries of Central Asia have remained united by a common history, culture and way of life. His description includes only one part of the historical region. Scott Haase (2008) has presented a study on the history, society, culture of Central Asia and its effects on the current political developments of the region. But there is a real dearth of research on the geography and geopolitics of Turkistan. This research is an attempt to fill this research gap. Hopefully, it will be a contribution to the greater knowledge and geopolitical understanding of Turkistan.

#### **Aim and Objective:**

Turkistan represents a large geographical area of Inner Asia and Central Asia. For all purposes, it is considered a 'geopolitical entity'. This region always had great importance in the history of Central Asia. As a result of its location, it served as a link between East and West. Located in the 'Heart of Asia' it constituted an important area for religious, ethnolinguistic, economic and geopolitical interests. This area has always been important from a geostrategic and geoeconomic perspective. In the present circumstances also, it has great strategic importance due to the availability of extraordinary oil and gas reserves. This research presents the geographical and geopolitical characteristics of Turkistan.

The geography and history of Turkistan have repeatedly attracted the attention of social scientists (Abdurakhimova, 2002). This research presents the geopolitical history of Turkistan and the subsequent manoeuvring of its geocultural identity for geopolitical political ambitions.

#### **Geopolitics of Turkistan:**

The geography of Turkistan makes it a significant geopolitical region. It has always remained so throughout history. In the first half of the 19th century, the geopolitical interests of British and the Russian empires converted the area of Turkistan into the playground of the 'Great Game'. The British approach was mainly governed by the need to protect itself against Russian expansion. On the contrary, the Russian empire proceeded with its territorial expansion. It was also governed by the need to prevent possible attacks from outside. Strengthening its positions in Central Asia allowed Russians to limit and control the influence of Great Britain in the region. The Game is not yet over. After the disintegration of Soviet Union, Turkistan (both (Eastern and Western Turkistan) has once again emerged as the 'geographical pivot of history' in geopolitical calculations of the Great Game of 21st century. Obviously, the players have changed.

#### **Geopolitics of Turkism or Pan-Turkistan:**

Pan-Turkism (and/or Turanism) is known geopolitical ideology of Turkey. [This is an ideology of trans nationalism. It demands for Turkish unification on the basis of common historical, linguistic, cultural and religious affinities]. During 19th century and in the early 20th century the geopolitical idea of Turkistan took the shape. Initially, it started as a political movement but soon became important

geopolitical manoeuvring. It sought to unite the Turks of the Ottoman and Russian empires against the tsarist empire and the growing Russian domination in the region. It was a grand geopolitical idea. Its goal was the political union of all Turkish-speaking peoples in the Ottoman Empire, Russia, China, Iran and Afghanistan. Thus, it was an endeavour to unite all Turkic nations into one nation.

The geopolitical endeavour of Turkism or Pan-Turkistan (movement) was an attempt of the unification of all ethnic Turkish (Turkic) and Turanian in Turkistan through cultural integration. The idea of consolidating all ethnic groups around the Turkish nation has always been on the geopolitical agenda of Turkey. The Revival of Ottoman Empire has remained behind the revived geopolitical idea of Turkistan.

Since the dissolution of Soviet Union, the idea of Turkistan re-emerged as a geopolitical concept. There has been a wider appeal for the cause of achieving greater unity of Turkistan in the Central Asian republics (Anthony Hyman, 1997). It is an issue of nationalism of all-Central Asian people. It also includes Turkey and Xinjiang. It has emerged as a political phenomenon.

It has deep resonances with the old idea. It has wide acceptability in intellectual circles in Central Asia. The essence of its enduring attraction is the firm belief in nationalist circles of the importance of what are claimed to be its shared Turkic cultural and ethnic roots, as well as a shared language (albeit in widely differing dialects) linking the scattered Turkic peoples (Anthony Hyman, 1997). This concept has also adopted a religious character.

#### **Geopolitics of Turkism and Future Geopolitics:**

Geopolitics of Turkism is idea of unity. It demands for the 'unity of language and religion'. It indicates a new form of international politics. Before the disintegration of Soviet Union, during the riots in Alma Ata in 1986, slogans were shouted that had clear Pan-Turk content. Even the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev accepted it as a manifestation of nationalism. (Landau, 1988). Nazarbayev accepted pan-Turkism as a pillar of national identity of his country. Once quoting Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, Nazarbayev told a gathering in Ankara in 2012 that 'the time will come when all the Turks will unite. Therefore, I want to greet all the Turkic brothers. If we all (living between Altai and the Mediterranean Sea) unite, then we will be a very effective force in the world.' Nazarbayev had taken several other measures to popularize pan-Turkic notions. He renamed the southern region of Shymkent as Turkistan, a reference to what pan-Turkic see as their spiritual homeland. All these gave boost to the re-emergence of the geopolitical idea of pan-Turkism.

Turkey was the first country to officially recognize the independence of countries of Central Asia (Wheeler, 2013). It paved the way for the restoration of the historical, linguistic and cultural bonds with these countries. It also paved way for cooperation with the newly-independent countries. It also helped turkey to work on its geopolitical narrative of pan-Turkistan, which was based on pan-Turkic identity and 'Turkic unity'. For Turkey, the countries of Central Asia offered an avenue to reflect its geopolitical priorities and pursue strategic goals not only in this region but also in other parts of the world. However, over the years, both turkey and other Turkic countries in the neighbourhood recognized that there were significant economic and geopolitical obstacles for creation of greater Turkistan (Aydyn, 2004).

Geography does not determine all strategies of foreign policies but geography or geographical configurations present opportunities for policies (Huseyin Bagci, 2009). The geostrategies should be rooted in geopolitical, geocultural and geoeconomic realities. In the early 1990s, the disintegration of the Soviet Union created a geopolitical vacuum in Turkistan (Central Asia). When a geopolitical vacuum emerges, neighbouring countries try to carve out new (geopolitical) roles for themselves. In the intervening years, the neighbouring countries have developed geopolitical rivalry to extend their sphere of influence in the region. It deepened the rivalry of major (power) players in the region. In the last couple of decades, Russia and China have emerged as big players on the geopolitical landscape

of Turkistan (Central Asia). This landscape has also witnessed the balancing act of Turkey with Russia and China.

The great enthusiasm generated by the proximity to the co-ethnic countries led to promises that Turkey would prove unable to keep ... The role ascribed to Turkey as a bridge country failed soon (Wheeler, 2013). Given the geopolitical landscape of Turkistan (Central Asia) it was not feasible for Turkey to create a larger organisation. Therefore, it preferred to work through bilateral relations instead of create a large regional forum. Even then, Turkey was faced with stiff competing with Russian interests and later on Chinese interests. Consequently, Turkey adopted a more pragmatic approach towards other Turkic countries.

In the initial years, Turkey tried hard for the unity of Turkic countries. For Turkey, the unity of Turkic countries in general and Central Asia, in particular, provides the crucial space to reflect its geopolitical ambitions and pursue strategic goals. But the countries of the region were not ready to compromise with their sovereignty. Russia continued to be the most important military might in the region (Ziegler, 2014). It has extended its influence through Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. On the other hand, China extended its influence through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Turkey is still using a variety of tools to increase its sphere of influence in Central Asia, with the same old idea of uniting the Turkic republics but it has shed the aggression behind the unity of Turkic countries. The Organization of Turkic States (OTS), which includes Turkey, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as Turkmenistan works for peace and stability in the Central Asian region.

Turkey no longer seeks leadership role in the geopolitical space of Turkistan (Central Asia). This is especially because it has gradually but decisively recognized the limits to its political and economic influence. The constructive approach of Turkey is based on pragmatism. It gives opportunities to strengthen its position in the region. But at the same time, Turkey is faced with opposition from Turkey for its growing political and economic presence. Russia and China, two major players in Central Asia. Ankara has growing trade relations with China and energy dependence on Russia. Therefore, Turkey wants to improve its political and economic relations with the countries of the region without harming its ties with either Russia or China.

The aspirations of Turkey in Central Asia coincide with the rising influence of China in the region through its Belt and Road Initiative. On the other hand, Russia is the strongest state in the region in military and political terms. Chinese policies in Central Asia might hamper Russian power in the area. In that situation Turkey offers it another partner to help curtail Chinese influence. Thus, Turkey holds a balance-of-power between Russia and China in this region. The conflict of interests of all these countries along with other distant countries will take time to resettle the geopolitics of Turkistan.

### **Conclusion:**

Geopolitics is still (and will always remain) relevant to analyse the relations of states (HuseyinBagci, 2009). Since the early 1990s, the geopolitical space of Central Asia has gone through major geopolitical changes. During the initial years, Turkey endeavoured to establish a sphere of influence in Turkistan (Central Asia). But it was faced with sever challenges. Even after the disintegration of Soviet Union there had been no significant change for Russia. In fact, during the early years of the 2000s, Russia had firmly established its regional influence. It diminished hopes of Turkey for a greater geopolitical role in the region. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan became members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) led by Russia, while all Central Asian countries except only Turkmenistan are also members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). China has stepped up its economic influence in Central Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These geopolitical changes have affected geopolitical strategies of Turkey in the

region. Changes in the geopolitical landscape of Turkistan (Central Asia) has shaped its geopolitical outlook. In the recent past Turkey has consciously or deliberately avoided rivalry with Russia and China. It may act as a balance-of-power between Russia and China in this region.

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