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Afghanistan as a Factor in Central Asia's Security

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ABSTRACT

Central Asia has enjoyed relative stability over the past few years there is an uncertainty about the future of the regional stability. From the years of independence these states have gone under political, economic and social transformations. Political transitions, the breakdown of interdependencies of the Soviet infrastructure, diverse pace of economic development, multi vector foreign policies has pushed each state towards different political, security and economic scenarios. But the insecurity in Afghanistan is jeopardizing the stability in Central Asia, which has not been resolved yet. The future of Central Asian States is in Asia and in Europe, both in the East and the West. During the early days of independence of the Central Asian States, the jubilation for nationalism and religious revivalism was so high that the central Asian states were forced to align with their Islamic neighboring countries like Afghanistan and Iran. An open door policy was followed with the hope that an extended neighborhood would stabilize their independence and will reduce their dependency on Russia. The terrorist bombings of the United States on September 11, 2001 fundamentally changed the geopolitics of the region, which became very important to US security interests. Both energy and international terrorism drew US physical presence in this region. The rise of Taliban and its coming to power in Kabul has radically distorted the security scenario in Central Asia.

Key Words : Security, Foreign policies, Doorpolicy, Political transitions

INTRODUCTION

Stephane Hessel sums up the multitudes of freedom by saying "History's direction is toward more "justice and more freedom—though not the unbridled freedom of the fox in a henhouse."

Central Asia has enjoyed relative stability over the past quarter of century. Yet there is an uncertainty when it comes to the future of the regional stability. All the way through the years of independence, these states to a different extent have gone under political, economic and social transformations and did not subside to the pressure of both internal and external risks as these states are dealing with both traditional and nontraditional security threats. However, political transitions, the breakdown of interdependencies of the Soviet infrastructure, diverse pace of economic development, multi vector foreign policies pushing each state towards different political, security and economic entities are among many factors that determine the present and the future of the Central Asian states. Moreover, insecurity in Afghanistan, which is jeopardizing the stability in Central Asia, has not been resolved yet, despite tremendous efforts by the international community. While some domestic reforms were successful, others had rather negative consequences for the stability and prosperity of the region. Greater powers' interest for the regions' resources and its strategic location can either turn into a source of prosperity or conflict, depending on the path Central Asian countries choose for themselves.[1]

1. Current Challenges to Central Asia and Afghanistan: Towards a Better World Edited by Anna Gussarova CAISS (Central Asia Institute for Strategic Studies)

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According to President Nazarbayev, "multi-vector policy is "to develop friendly and predictable relations with all the countries that play a significant role in world affairs and are of practical importance to our country. Kazakhstan by virtue of its geopolitical location and economic potential is not entitled to become isolated by regional issues only. It would be incomprehensible not only to our multi-ethnic population, but also to the entire world community".[2]

The future of Central Asian States is in Asia and in Europe, both in the East and the West. Conducting precisely this multi vector policy, can eliminate the existence of security challenges. We will strengthen favourable external conditions for economic and political reforms in our country.[3] Today, for the first time in human history, the fate of all states and all peoples, great and small, is determined by the world's global development: "One cannot live in a global society and be free from it." The peoples of the world, sharing a common destiny, must survive and develop together. [4]

During the early days of independence of the Central Asian States, the jubilation for nationalism and religious revivalism was so high that the central Asian states were forced to align with their Islamic neighboring countries like Afghanistan and Iran. An open door policy was followed with the hope that an extended neighborhood would stabilize their independence and will reduce their dependency on Russia. Monetary support started coming from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan to augment religious and cultural institutions. Groups propagating political Islam were finding ideological and material support from these states. A struggle for cultural influence began after their independence. It was expected that due to historical, cultural and religious affinity, and because of their own military and economic weakness, these five central Asian states could be brought under their influence.

Central Asian states joined the organization of Islamic conference and other regional organisations such as Economic cooperation organization to strengthen their ties with Islamic countries. Economic limitation of member countries and tensions between them made these organisations ineffective. Early hopes of strengthening economic integration with Islamic neighbors have not materalised. These neighboring states and other Islamic states were much interested in the propagation their own brand of ideology to obtain hegemony that barely helped in ensuring security or development in Central Asia. Competing perspectives and limited objectives of Central Asia's southern neighbors were bound to impose on their capacity to have a strong influence in the region.

In the early years of Central Asia's independence Iran took the leading position in encouraging and determining religious revival in Central Asia. This included sponsored missionary activity, distribution of religious books, broadcasting of Iranian television channels and radio in Central Asia, training of mullahs in Iranian madrasahs, and opening of religious schools and mosques. Iran was purposely supporting the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan. The initial fervor, however, calmed down as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan entered in a big way in this fray and Iran subsequently withdraw herself and became less aggressive in religious proselytizing, and started concentrating more on good diplomatic and economic relations.

The involvement of Islamic neighbors and Islamic States, especially in Tajikistan, brought Russia right back to Central Asia after initial hesitation plus the fear of religious extremism and instability from Central Asia that could affect Russia's Caucasus and Volga region, where bulk of its Muslim nationalities reside. The beginning of Tajik civil war in 1992 and cross border support to Islamic opposition in Tajikistan led to the stationing of Russian troops on Tajik-Afghan border, which ensured Tajikistan's territorial integrity during and after the civil war.[5]

So in this context Afghanistan also became a concern for security in Central Asia. Particularly because Afghanistan shares direct borders with three Central Asian states namely Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. These are the porous borders not guarded by Russia in the initial period. Any change in Afghanistan was bound to impact on Central Asian states particularly

2. Ibid

3. Ibid

4. Volume 15 Issue 1 2014 CENTRAL ASIA THE CAUCASUS Journal of Social and Political Studies 2014, by Oleg BELORUS page no 8

5. Volume 15 Issue 1 2014 CENTRAL ASIA THE CAUCASUS Journal of Social and Political Studies 2014, by Oleg BELORUS

on bordering states. As a fact, Afghanistan is world's largest producer of opium and one of the largest producers of hashish. Porous borders gave accessibility of drugs trafficking, arms trafficking and most importantly spread of radicalisation.

Rise of Taliban and Security Concern in Central Asia:

The rise of Taliban and its coming to power in Kabul radically distorted the security scenario in Central Asia. The region was in the danger of being sucked in to a world of radical Islam, the foundations of which had been laid in Afghanistan. However, the victory of Taliban also ended the illusion that secular and moderate Central Asia can integrate with its Islamic neighbors in a large cultural space for mutual advantage. Some states like Iran, changed course after feeling the heat from the Taliban and others like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, sided with the Taliban.

During this phase Russia became the major security guarantor of Central Asia and China started looking beyond economic opportunities in the region to issues of regional stability and religious emanating from Pakistan and Afghanistan, looked at Central Asia as a region with which its security interests are converging. Symptomatic of these changes were the settlement of the Sino- Central Asian border problems and the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Iran's role in conflict resolution in Tajikistan, and India and Iran's role in coordinating their efforts with Russia to help the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan were symbol of the positive role these Asian powers played in preserving peace and stability in Central Asia.

Formation of Northern alliance:

"The Afghan Northern Alliance, officially known as the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan was a military front that came to formation in late 1996 after the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Taliban) took over Kabul. The United Front was assembled by key leaders of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Taliban) took over Kabul. The United Front was assembled by key leaders of the Islamic State of Afghanistan, particularly president in exile Burhanuddin Rabbani and former Defense Minister Ahmad Shah Massoud". Initially it included mostly Tajiks but by 2000, leaders of other ethnic groups had joined the Northern Alliance. This included Abdul Rashid Dostum, Mohammad Mohaqiq, Abdul Qadir, Sayed Hussein Anwari and others.

The Northern Alliance fought a defensive war against the Taliban government. They received support from Iran, Russia, Turkey, India, Tajikistan and others, while the Taliban were backed by Al-Qaeda. The Northern Alliance was mostly made up of ethnic Tajiks, but later included Uzbeks, Hazaras, and Pashtuns. The Taliban government was dominated by Pashtuns with other groups being the minority. After the US-led invasion and establishment of the Karzai administration in late 2001, the Northern Alliance broke apart and different political parties were formed.

Creation of Northern Distribution Network (NDN):

Afghanistan bordered Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan so alternate supply routes, termed the Northern Distribution Network, exist to move supplies into Afghanistan through these countries. However, these routes are longer and costlier than the routes through Pakistan. There are several different routes included in the Northern Distribution Network. The most commonly used route, though also one of the longest, starts at the port of Riga, Latvia on the Baltic Sea, and continues for 3,212 miles (5,169 km) by train southwards through Russia, using railroads built by Russia in the 1980s for the Soviet war in Afghanistan. The supplies then pass through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan before reaching Afghanistan's northern border at Termez. To get to the south of the country, the supplies must be loaded onto trucks and transported through the mountainous Hindu Kush by means of the Salang Tunnel. The Salang Tunnel, which is the main connection between northern and southern Afghanistan, is 1.5 miles long and situated at an altitude of 11,100 feet. The route is prone to avalanches and is quite dangerous.

Another, more southern route starts at Poti, Georgia on the Black Sea and continues to Baku, Azerbaijan where the goods are transferred to barges and ferried across the Caspian Sea. Supplies land in Turkmenistan and then move by rail through Uzbekistan before arriving at the Afghan border. In 2010, this route carried one third of the NDN's traffic. Over one-third of all of the nonlethal equipment including fuel, clothing, and food used by the U.S. Department of Defense in Afghanistan traveled through Baku at one point.

A third route, created in order to avoid going through the often volatile country of Uzbekistan, goes from Kazakhstan to Kyrgyzstan and then through Tajikistan

before reaching Termez. This expanded the US presence in Afghanistan which impacted the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia. Key transit states were enjoying the new leverage over Washington while others could apply pressure indirectly. This engagement was a vehicle for increasing constructive U.S. interaction with transit states. Understanding and knowing how to manage these geopolitical challenges and opportunities will be critical for the United States and are core goals were of these projects.

Luckily, these immediate needs and long-term objectives are not mutually exclusive, but rather are reinforcing. By linking logistics with the reinvigorated development and geopolitical goals called for in the White House's Afghanistan and Pakistan strategy, this project helped the United States take responsible steps towards a viable Afghanistan that is economically and politically integrated with regional and global markets. At the same time, the project will helped the United States further its interests within transit states all while expanding its logistical throughput capacity to Afghanistan.

September 11, 2001 Attack on USA:

The terrorist bombings of the United States on September 11, 2001 fundamentally changed the geopolitics of the region, which became very important to US security interests. Both energy and international terrorism drew US physical presence in this region. Though earlier it operated through NATO's peace programmes, it now became the main security choice for the Central Asian states. The US presence in the region had worried the Russia and its presence in the region has equally grown. Both have troops and military bases in Central Asia. There is a danger that US- Russia cooperation could marginalize the Asian powers in the region and jeoparadise their interests. However in variety of ways China, Iran, and India have contributed to the stability in the region and met some of its security needs.

Stability and Reconstruction in Afghanistan:

Central Asian states and India have a big stake in ensuring economic reconstruction, inter- ethnic harmony, and stability of Afghanistan. As assign of importance that India attaches to Afghanistan, New Delhi has converted to grant the $ 100 million loan it had earlier extended to Karzai government. Eventually, the stability of the post Taliban set up in Afghanistan can get better the security scenario in Central Asia as well as India.

India has reportedly renegotiated the use of Farkhor in Tajikistan as a base for assistance in Tajikistan as a base for assistance to Afghanistan. Earlier it had built a military hospital and an airstrip there to help the Northern Alliance. The hospital was shifted to Kabul after the fall of Taliban. India signed a bilateral agreement during Indian defence minister's visit to Dushanbe in APRIL 2002 .according to the agreement , India will train the Tajik defence personnel, service and retrofit Soviet and Russian military Equipment and teach English to Air force personnel. There are suggestions that the base in Farkhor is a sign of India joining the new great game of scramble for Central Asia's oil and gas reserves and of India's intention to have a ring of bases around Pakistan.

Conclusion:

A stable Afghanistan would not be in Central Asia's interest rather it would be in the interest of all the neighboring states. Any disturbances in Afghanistan is likely to cause instability in neighboring states. A stable Central Asia shall be win-win for all. And the most suitable way of ensuring stability in Afghanistan shall be to increase economic funding. The reconstruction of Afghanistan requires sufficient funding from external source. Apart from this , improving trade and commerce relations, increasing people to people contact and confidence building measures can strengthen relations with neighbors and can create conducive environment for cooperation.

The major irritant in bringing stability in Afghanistan is Pakistan. Pakistan has certain strategic interest in Afghanistan. First, in situation of war with India, Pakistan can safely place its nuclear weapons in Afghanistan and second, Afghanistan can provide access to increase influence in Central Asia. The best way is to increase funding by sidelining Pakistan. International community can play major role in bringing stability in Afghanistan because a stable Afghanistan shall be in the interest of all.

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