

Pakistan's Strive for Strategic Relevance in Central Asia

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ABSTRACT

Once the site of the trans-Asiatic trade route, popularly known as Silk Road over which civilizations of the East and West exchanged goods and ideas, Central Asia is currently an arena of fierce competition among major powers for influence and control. Endowed with vast energy reserves (an estimated 15 to 17 billion barrels oil and nearly 360 trillion cubic feet of gas), Central Asia has compelling attraction for both global and regional powers since the collapse of the former communist super power and emergence of five independent Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Given its geographic proximity and certain commonly shared features, notably religion, Pakistan has sought to carve out a role for itself by cultivating and strengthening relations with the nascent Central Asian Republics (CARs). Pakistan's strategic myopia, however, skewed its focus on securing influence in Afghanistan, undermining its efforts to build inroads into the region. In any case, the CARs were not very much inclined towards their Southern Muslim neighbors in the initial years of their independence partly because of their cold relations during the Soviet rule and partly, the fear of Islamic activism. The past few years have seen Pakistan's pro-active engagement in Central Asia spurred by several imperatives, namely the expanding presence of India in Afghanistan and its fear of encirclement. This article thus argues that Pakistan's Central Asia policy is no longer guided by regional hegemonic aspirations; it is largely security-driven, the centerpiece of which is to contain India's growing influence in the area either through non-state actors as its proxies or formal alliance with other powerful contenders, namely China and Turkey.

Key Words : Pakistan's strive, Central Asia, Silk road, CARs

Historical Overview

Located at the juncture of Central Asia, South Asia and West Asia, Pakistan is separated from Central Asia by the sixteen kilometers Wakhan Strip in far northeastern Afghanistan. It is an area connecting Afghanistan and China that could be the convenient land link between Pakistan and Tajikistan.¹ In addition to Pakistan's geographic proximity, Central Asia also has strong historical and cultural ties with the South Asia dating back to the Indus Valley civilization in the second century BC. Different empires that rose and fell in Central Asia established their hold in the area extending from the Caspian to the Arabian Sea including contemporary Pakistani territory in the past. It was, however, during the 2nd and 3rd centuries that first ever link was established between

Central Asia and the people living in the parts now comprising Pakistan. The nomads of Central Asia, notably the Scythian Tribe came to Pakistan from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan through Taxila and Gilgit, and left their cultural and social imprints there. Relations between the subcontinent and Central Asia reached its high point in the wake of the rise of Kushan Empire in northwest India with the Pakistani city of Peshawar becoming its capital, known in those days as Purushapura. Under the Kushan rulers, the union of northwestern India and Central Asia into a common state resulted in free flow of men, ideas and institutions between the two regions.² It was also during this period that *Shalwar Kameez* was introduced in the region and later on became the national dress of Pakistan.³

The establishment of Turkish rule in Gilgit and Hunza and rise of Turki Shahi Empire in the areas of present Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa during the early medieval period facilitated the advent of Islam in the sub-continent. Subsequently, the Muslim rulers of the region linked Gilgit and Northern areas with Tashkent and Samarkand. The Ghazni and Ghorī dynasties which were the successors of Seljuks, Karakhittais and Samanides strengthened the religious bonds between the people of Central Asia and the surrounding region including the areas now forming Pakistan.⁴ The socio-cultural interaction continued to flourish during the later medieval period, leading even to the development of political relations between the two sides. Babur, the founder of the empire of the Mughal Empire in the 16th Century was, for instance, a descendant of Temurlang, a Turkic *Kagan* from Central Asia. Under the Mughal rulers, 'extensive exchanges in art, architecture, literature and even dresses and food delicacies between the Indian subcontinent and the land of their origin contributed to the evolution of a brilliant cultural synthesis.'⁵

The cultural and political interactions between Pakistan and Central Asia, however, suffered reversals at the end of the Colonial rule and the division of the sub-continent partly because of the onset of Cold War and partly, cultural transformation of the Central Asian region under the Soviet rule. While Pakistan joined the Western alliance against Communist Russia and later extended support to the Mujahideen in Afghanistan to oust the Soviet forces, Central Asia remained completely cut off from the Muslim world, particularly the southern Muslim region. It was with the Central Asian states gaining independence from the Soviet tutelage in 1991 that Pakistan saw a historic opportunity to build a special role for itself in a region where it had previously no active involvement. Throughout the 1990s, Pakistani policy makers and analysts interpreted the Muslim identity and long-standing historical ties as the country's unique diplomatic assets that could be utilized towards forging close economic, political and cultural bonds with the region. Reflective of this, Pakistan set up Joint Economic Commissions (JECs) with all the newly independent Central Asian States to promote economic and commercial cooperation soon after it extended diplomatic recognition. Besides, Pakistan also initiated a Special Technical Assistance Programme (STAP) in 1992-93 under which it promised to provide fully funded training facilities to Central Asian states that included courses ranging from English language, banking and accounting to diplomacy.⁶

At the same time, policy-makers in Islamabad explored possibilities of developing road and rail links to the region in a bid to project Pakistan's influence into Central Asia and facilitate its access to the region's hydro-electric and hydrocarbon resources.⁷ In the energy sector, likewise, Pakistan signed a trilateral treaty along with Turkmenistan and Afghanistan in December 2002 for a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan via Afghanistan to Pakistan at the estimated cost of 2 billion US dollars. Topping them all, the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) comprising Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan provided Pakistan a common platform not only to develop economic bonds with the CARs but also

contain India's potential influence in the region. The ECO grew out of the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD), which was founded in July 1964 as an appendage of the US-led security alliance in West Asia. The RCD was renamed in 1985 as the ECO, which expanded in 1992 to include five of the newly emergent Central Asian States and Azerbaijan in the Caucasus.⁸

Pakistan's Central Asia Dilemma in the 1990s

Pakistan during the 1990s deployed its available diplomatic assets in a determined bid to carve out a zone of influence in the post-Soviet space while at the same time seeking to thwart India's influence on its western flank.⁹ All the same, Pakistan failed to make significant headway in terms of penetrating the region whether culturally or politically. Nor did its efforts to forge a broad Islamic coalition comprising countries from Turkey to Pakistan against India fructify because of chronic instability and chaos in Afghanistan, the land bridge connecting Pakistan to much of Central Asia.¹⁰ As Afghanistan plunged into a protracted civil war in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal, Pakistan gave priority to the establishment of a stable government in Kabul positively disposed towards Islamabad. Accordingly, Pakistan supported Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of a Pashtun militant faction, *Hizb-e-Islami* until the rise of Taliban in 1994.¹¹ A predominantly Pushtun group, Taliban emerged as a messianic movement in Kandahar made up of Afghan *talibs* (students) from the Islamic *madrassas* (seminaries) in NWFP and Baluchistan, run by the Pakistani *Deobandi* party, *Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Islam* (JUI) and its splinter groups.¹² Amidst the internecine factional fighting among the Mujahedeen forces, Pakistani decision makers believed that Taliban was the only force in post-Soviet Afghanistan capable of restoring stability and providing Pakistan 'the strategic depth that it required to buttress its defence against India' apart from 'facilitating its moves to extend its influence in the energy-rich Central Asian Republics (CARs).'¹³

With support from within Pakistan, the Taliban gained ground within the east and the south and eventually controlled most of the country by 1997. The rise of Taliban in post-Soviet Afghanistan, arguably, helped serve Pakistan's twin strategic objectives of putting up a relatively stable and friendly government in Kabul and limiting India's access to the country. All this, however, yielded precious little either in terms of facilitating Pakistani penetration into Central Asia or enhancing its status as pre-eminent power in the so-called 'Islamic bloc.' On the contrary, the Taliban proved to be "more of a liability than an asset for Pakistan", especially since August 1998 when the Afghanistan-based *al-Qaeda* carried out simultaneous terror attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.¹⁴ An inspirational figure among his Arab Afghan supporters, Osama bin-Laden, on his return to Afghanistan in 1996 struck up friendship with the Taliban supremo Mullah Muhammad Omar and shifted to Kandahar to build the *al-Qaeda*, the base in Arabic, for a pan-Islamic Jihadi movement. The *al-Qaeda* network of bin Laden, according to some analysts, was a loosely organized confederation of diverse range of Islamic terrorist groups including the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, al Gama al Islamiyya, Jamiti Ul-ilasmi, the Harkat ul-Mujahidin active in Kashmir valley, the mujaheddin in Chechnya, and Danghestan, Abu Sayyaf in Philippines and some extremist elements from Algeria's GIA.¹⁵

In brief, the *al-Qaeda* represented a united front of the Islamic warriors rather than a tightly disciplined movement. Many of these holy warriors enjoyed patronage of both Pakistani establishment as well as the country's Islamist parties, notably *Jamaat-i-Islami*, *Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Islam* (JUI) and its splinter groups.¹⁶ Interestingly, the U.S. all through preferred to stay out of the line of fire hoping that it could escape the Islamic animus and avoid being labeled the Great Satan. No wonder, the Pakistan-sponsored Taliban was viewed by some American policy-makers as anti-modern

rather than anti-Western and found “nothing objectionable” in its attempts to impose Islamic code of conduct.¹⁷ It was only after the 1998 bombings of American embassies that the U. S. policy towards the jihadi groups in post-Soviet Afghanistan changed drastically with Pakistan coming under international pressure to act decisively against the *al-Qaeda* network of bin Laden. Finally, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001 followed by the US-led war on terrorism left Pakistan with no choice but to turn against its erstwhile proxies. With the overthrow of the Taliban and dismantling of al-Qaeda following the invasion of Afghanistan by the United States and its allies in October 2001, Pakistan suffered a crushing blow to its regional hegemonic ambitions.

Pakistan’s Post-Taliban Central Asia Policy

The demise of the Taliban not merely eroded Pakistan’s strategic leverage *vis-à-vis* its arch rival India in Afghanistan, but also adversely affected its national security environment with India gaining unprecedented access and wider acceptability in the region. It may be noted that India’s presence during the Pakistan-backed Taliban rule was largely restricted to the areas in north under the control of the famed Northern Alliance commander, Ahmad Shah Masood. During this period, India had formed an unofficial coalition along with Russia and the Central Asian state of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in support of the anti-Taliban resistance movement led by the Northern Alliance. While the end of the Taliban rule offered India a new opportunity to regain its strategic foothold in Afghanistan, Pakistan found it increasingly difficult to reconcile to its loss of strategic clout it enjoyed before the installation of the Afghan interim government headed by Hamid Karzai under the UN auspices.¹⁸ This in some ways goes to explain why Pakistan persisted with its efforts to resurrect the Taliban-Osama brand of radicals even though it officially joined the US-led war on terrorism and declared its support for the international efforts to achieve a stable Afghanistan.¹⁹

Ironically, however, Pakistan’s Islamist adventurism to bolster some of its foreign policy objectives in India and Afghanistan undermined its long-term goal of carving out a special role for itself in post-Soviet Central Asia. For the Central Asian rulers, what remained a constant source of worry in the 1990s was the importation of Taliban and al-Qaeda inspired extremism into the region due to porous borders with Afghanistan. The permeability of the borders not only facilitated the flows of weapons and terrorists, but also contributed to the emergence of Central Asia as the main transit route for opium from Afghanistan towards the European markets. The narcotics traffic was a major source of funding extremist Islamic elements, especially in places combining population growth, poverty, religious ferment, and political repression like the Ferghana Valley. The May 2005 uprising in Andijon city in the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan indeed revealed the region’s vulnerability to the risk of Islamist terrorism even several years after the rout of Osama-Taliban axis of terror in 2001. The leading Islamist groups of the region, such as the Islamic Movement of Turkistan (IMT), earlier known as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* (HuT) openly called for the overthrow of the constitutional system to establish an Islamic Caliphate in Central Asia.²⁰ Regardless of their doctrinal differences, both the moderate and radical Islamists active in the region had close links with Islamic funding bodies in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. Predictably, the Central Asian leaders were not only apprehensive about Pakistan’s regional role, but also directly accused the latter of training Islamist factions of Central Asian origins.²¹

India's Growing Presence

Wary of Pakistan's use of the Jihadi brand of Islamist ideology as an instrument of its external policy, the Central Asian states opted for India as their South Asian partner while recognizing cross-border terrorism and religious extremism as constituting a common threat. So did the Karzai government in Afghanistan, which already struggling to cope with the challenge posed by Pakistan-backed Taliban insurgency in southern and eastern parts of the country, considered India as its closest ally. Further, the US called for greater Indian involvement in the post-war reconstruction of Afghanistan less for strategic reasons than New Delhi's close proximity to the leaders of the Northern Alliance. Even Iran, another influential player in the unfolding 'Great Game' in the region, preferred to remain cool towards Pakistan, especially since the killing of its diplomats by the Taliban forces in Mazar-e-Sharif in northern Afghanistan in 1998. Ideologically averse to Pakistan's patronage of Sunni brand of Islamism, Iran preferred to develop strategic relationship with India encompassing all areas of cooperation.²²

In all, the post-9/11 period saw India gaining strategic edge, thanks to its pro-active engagement in Afghanistan and Central Asia commensurate with its new international profile as a 'rising power.' While India's influence was spread across the spectrum in Afghanistan as one of the largest donors of the reconstruction projects, it was ahead of other regional contenders in forging strategic cooperation with almost all the Central Asian states as reflected in high level of defense exchanges and joint military exercises. More significantly, India for the first time established its military presence in Tajikistan following a bilateral agreement signed in April 2002. Accordingly, India undertook the refurbishing of the airbase at Ayni (also known as Farkhor), nearly 80 miles south of Tajik capital, Dushanbe, which was completed in 2007. Media reports suggest that India was preparing to deploy a fleet of Mig-29 fighter-bombers at Ayni along with some Kiran trainer aircraft to train Tajik pilots.²³ The location of India's military outpost along Tajik- Afghan border is important as Pakistan is only 35 km away and Afghanistan's Wakkan Corridor separates Tajikistan from Pakistan's volatile Northwest Frontier Province. Thus, using its Tajik base, India hoped to influence events in Afghanistan, especially preventing Taliban's return to power, monitoring Islamist terrorist groups active along the Pak-Afghan border and above all, keeping Pakistan on a leash.²⁴ Besides, the energy agreements that India signed with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in 2006 also marked a significant breakthrough in its efforts to secure a niche for itself in the region's hydrocarbons.²⁵

Pakistan's Struggle for Regional Role

With India successfully projecting its influence through increased involvement in the area, Pakistan found itself outflanked in the decade since the overthrow of the Taliban rule. To counter India's growing presence in what Pakistan considers its backyard, it directed its efforts to destabilize the Karzai government through a wave of terror attacks unleashed by its proxies, namely the *Lashkar-e-Taiba* and the *Haqqani* network.²⁶ Faced with unmitigated security threat exacerbated by the Pakistani attempts to install the *Haqqani* network and the Taliban to positions of power in the post-American political dispensation in Kabul, the Karzai government turned to India for a sustainable role in post-2014 Afghanistan through strategic partnership agreement signed in October 2011.²⁷ While the underlying objective of agitating security situation in Afghanistan was to project Pakistan as the lone broker in the negotiations between the Taliban, the US and Kabul, the unfounded Pakistani allegations against India's involvement in covert operations in Pakistan's restless tribal areas along border with Afghanistan were meant to justify its countermeasures including the ISI orchestrated terror attacks on Indian missions.²⁸

Interestingly, Pakistani officials at the same time spared no occasions to underline the need for stabilizing the violence-torn Afghanistan in the event of the US military drawdown by 2014 and seeking cooperation with India for the effective utilization of the region's energy potential as was the case with its ambitious gas pipeline project from Turkmenistan via Afghanistan and Pakistan to India. Corollary to this was Pakistan's diplomatic pursuit to convince the regional actors of its strategic relevance by projecting the country as the natural link between the Eurasian heartland and the Arabian Sea and South Asia. During his visit to Central Asia in 2006, General Pervaiz Musharraf stated "We offer the critical overland routes and connectivity for mutually beneficial trade and energy transactions intra- regionally and inter-regionally."²⁹ It is thus contended by some analysts that there was a visible shift in focus of Pakistan's Central Asia policy in the latter half of the past decade from achieving 'strategic depth' against India to expansion of commercial ties by creating trade and transport corridors and access to ports so as to enhance its strategic salience in the area. Reflective of this, Pakistan has built the deep water port with the Chinese assistance in Gwadar located on its southern Makran coastline in the Baluchistan province.

Given the strategic location of the port, Gwadar can serve as an important regional shipping hub, providing the landlocked Central Asian republics, Afghanistan, and the Chinese Xinjiang region with much-desired access to the Arabian Sea. To help transform Gwadar into a energy and trade transportation hub, Pakistan is building a road that connects Gwadar to Saindak, the shortest route linking Central Asia and the Arabian Sea. As such, the port will facilitate the transfer of Central Asia's vast energy resources to world markets, augmenting Pakistan's coffers with significant profits in transit fees.³⁰ Development of Gwadar is the cornerstone of the ambitious \$46 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, which will "transform China from one to a two ocean power."³¹ The major barrier to the success of the project is the episodic flare-up of violence and terror attacks by the al-Qaeda affiliated groups and local Baluchis who consider the port as detrimental to their own economic interests.

While the violence-prone Baluchistan remains a source of concern for China as it is likely to deter potential foreign investors, the recent trilateral agreement signed between India, Iran and Afghanistan in May 2016 to develop Chabahar port located over 70 km from Gwadar will enable India to circumvent Pakistan and open up an alternative land-sea route for its trade with Afghanistan and beyond in Central Asia. Apart from promising to invest \$500 million in the development of the port, India has already spent \$100 million in building the 220-km Zaranj-Delaram highway in Afghanistan, also known as Route 606, which connects to Chabahar, the closest port to Afghanistan.³² Meanwhile, Indian Prime Minister Modi during his visit to Central Asia in July 2015 initiated discussion with Turkmenistan for the construction of Turkmenistan-Iran-India (TII) pipeline, a land-sea energy route through Iran which would bypass Pakistan. The pipeline would also complement India's trade plans for Central Asia, known as the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC) initiative launched in May 2002 in cooperation with Russia and Iran.³³

Conclusion

Regardless of the economic viability, the recent Indian policy initiatives in Central Asia are likely to reinforce Pakistani fear of 'encirclement' increasing the risk of the country's marginalization in the region. And this, arguably, explains why Pakistani security elite prefers to piggyback on China, a pre-eminent player seeking to fill the post-Soviet power vacuum under the umbrella of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), to counterbalance India's Central Asian foray. Founded in 2001, the SCO is a China-dominated multilateral body. Even though the SCO expanded to include

India and Pakistan in 2017,³⁴ the gap between India on the one side and China-Pakistan on the other in terms of their strategic and security perspectives is not likely to be bridged in the years ahead.

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