



## Factoring Central Asia into China's Afghanistan policy

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### ABSTRACT

China's footprints in Afghanistan are vied by many, both, friends and rivals as it cautiously reveals its geostrategic goals. It would like to emulate the African and Central Asian success story in Afghanistan as well, which is not terra incognita. Afghanistan has been the fulcrum of geopolitical balance of power during the Cold war days. China's Afghanistan policy (CAP) is marked by its insecurities of terrorism, extremism and separatism in Xinjiang province. It has heavily invested in procuring Central Asian energy resources. Both, the concerns go well in formulation of CAP. However, the presence of the US and Russia make the scenario competitive, where its 'Peaceful Rise' may be contested. Besides, China sees South Asian Region as its new Geoeconomic Frontier. All these concerns get factored into CAP. It remains to be seen what options partake in CAP, as China prepares for durable presence in Afghanistan in the long run.

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### 1. Introduction

If one looks at the map of Afghanistan, metaphorically now showcased as the 'Heart of Asia', then China is the only big power that has direct geographical access to Afghanistan and its energy and mineral resources. The rebuilding of Afghanistan post-2014 is largely harboured on China's financial muscle that it can deploy in harnessing these resources generating sufficient revenue for the Afghan state. But, there are critics who believe that China has been a free-rider and the major part of the burden has been shared by the western powers. It is opportune for

China to step in at this juncture given the fact that the losses western powers are suffering, which can only be compensated by China with a geopolitical bargain. At the same time, China also acknowledges that it has benefitted with the war on terror, which legitimised its own campaign in Xinjiang against the Uyghur separatists (Pantucci, 2010). The major powers seek China's increasing role in handling the Afghan situation as there is growing gap between the donor pledges and realised commitments on aid to Afghanistan. The foreign aid component of the Afghan government budget stands at 40 percent and the development budget component stands at 100 percent. The Afghan government is able to meet 11 percent of the total budget requirements from its increased revenue collection since 2009. Afghanistan still is short of \$7.2 billion dollars required to maintain its security and development momentum in the near future (Nijssen, 2012).

China has remained a silent spectator in the decade plus rebuilding process that was initiated in 2002. It remained cautious owing to binary factor of internal minorities and the Asian geopolitical order. Former are the Uyghur contumacies to growing Han population in Xinjiang, whilst the

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latter refers to China's reticence over the US–Japanese connivance with emerging Asian economies to curtail its influence; and of late the Indo–US strategic partnership with similar intent extended to South East Asia and South China Sea (Mohan, 2012). In both, the situations Afghanistan emerges as a bargaining chip. China would like to use its economic potential for leveraging Afghan situation that would increase its influence both in the East and South Asian region. On the other, it would like to work with the Afghan state that would help neutralise Islamist extremism currently harboured in its restive Xinjiang province. Here, the Afghan state remains the floating peg as its political economy remains largely minion to the US and its allies. This ambulatory geopolitics along 'silk route' appears both intrepid and furtive. China has demonstrated through its presence in Central Asia that it can play both ways, politics with economics and economics with politics. But, Afghanistan is a tricky situation. It has a third element and that is largely geo-cultural, the Islam. China has been so far reticent in factoring this as it has own insecurities in its backyard. But, there is increasing interest in Afghanistan by China as it has regional dividends both, in terms of access to natural resources and regional balance of power. China visualises these schema at different levels, but Afghan focus is the convergence of these geopolitical scales. China's geopolitical objectives are three-fold, to contain the separatism in Xinjiang, to create a southern connectivity for Central Asian and northern Afghanistan mineral resources, and calibrate India's South Asian dominance with its hegemony over the Af-Pak region (Clarke, 2013). This paper looks into the China's Afghanistan policy (CAP) and how it has dual operating scales wherein Central Asia proves to be the crucial partner in effective realisation of its hitherto unfathomed depths of Afghan quagmire.

### 1.1. Geopolitical goals of CAP

China's geopolitical interest in Afghanistan dates far back into the incipient beginnings of Cold war. The need to counter Soviet hegemony over Eurasian region motivated China to join the US sponsored Jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan. China was a co-campaigner with the CIA and Pakistan's ISI in providing weapons and material resources, and even training them for the guerrilla warfare. China also developed friendly ties with Hizb-i-Islami leader Hekmatyar, who was a major recipient of arms and military hardware at the time of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. It has long been in touch with Islamist parties, esp., the Hekmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) (Shahzad, 2002). China has had also struck deal with Taliban in the pre-9/11 days for not allowing sanctuary to Uyghur extremists in Afghanistan (Stratfor.com, 2000). China has been helpful in preventing any international sanction against these groups by the UN (Small, 2010). China's announced its Afghanistan policy with a bang when its State-Owned Enterprise (SOEs) China Metallurgical Group Company (MCC) bagged the \$3.5 billion contract of Aynak copper mines. It created a subsidiary namely, MCC-JCL Aynak Minerals Company Ltd (MJAM) that would developed the mining and the allied activities (Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, Afghanistan, 2013). The deal also includes

corporate responsibility projects for local area development that almost raises it to \$4.2 billion dollars making it the harbinger of development wave to come. China is very capable player that would hold out much needed help to the US and its allies, putatively to Afghanistan as well. The major objective of China's Afghanistan policy is to secure an Asian bargain for maintaining its hegemony in its vicinity. And, the same also to secure an important foothold into Afghanistan affairs that directly have consequence for its geoeconomic interests in Central Asia and strategic interests at home in Xinjiang. The major strength of China is its investment potential by State-Owned Enterprises (SOE) that can take fairly long-term policy goals due to state support. Rebuilding Afghanistan needs faith and pursuance of long-term goals. The incentive to work on policy for Afghanistan came with announcement of vast mineral resources that were found to have been lying unearthed worth \$ 1 trillion (Risen, 2010). This news set the pace for China's policy formulation based on its resource geoeconomics in Africa and Central Asia. China has another opportunity to channel these resources to its fast economic growth and concomitantly expand its trade in the Af-Pak region. But, Afghanistan is a tough call owing to the post-9/11 situation where there is a constant threat to state. Ashraf Ghani puts it that Afghanistan cannot become Congo, Botswana or Chile for that matter. It has to get its governance right in order to have proper development strategy (Tiffany, 2010). China has been aiding Afghanistan, but it still has to come out of tokenism. It provided \$ 5 million soon after the Afghan Transitional Authority (ATA) took power in February 2002. Chinese assistance to Afghanistan stood at more than \$175 million dollar in 2009 (China View, 2009). However, some of the magnanimous efforts have proved to be non-starter. Al Jazira ran a story on much trumpeted Jamhuriat 350-bed hospital in Kabul built by the Chinese and inaugurated by President Karzai in 2009 ran aground due to poor quality and faulty construction that is has been lying idle since inception. The fact remains that the operational costs of such health projects is simply beyond the purview of the Afghan government leading to general failure of goodwill diplomacy (Smith, 2012).

### 1.2. The US and South Asian factor

Chinese scholars are fascinated with the metaphor 'graveyard of empires', whenever they describe the US or-gies in Afghanistan (Payne, 2009). China suffered its initial losses Afghanistan in 2004 when 11 of its workers got killed in Kunduz (Gall, 2004). The hard power option in this light must have been ruled out because it would have involved more costs to men and material that would not have gone down well with the domestic politics. Moreover, it does not wish to be identified with the US as an ally in Afghanistan as it would earn the ire of the Islamists. Also, it would be difficult for China to persuade Pakistan to detest from the fundamentalists, who are a range of groups involved in terror activities, both in Afghanistan and India. These strategic assets influence the strategic convergence between the two affecting the geopolitics of the South Asian region. China's multilateralism is also the missing case as it

is more often been designed to curtail rather than working with the West. The soft power options seem to be best suited as China would like to use its enhanced economic strength for securing diplomatic gains. China also believes that the political and moral aspects of soft power can be effectively deployed when backed by economic directives. These aims became visible when China parried for 'good neighbour' policies as part of peripheral (*Zhoubian*) diplomacy from 1989 onwards towards Asia-Pacific states in the aftermath of Tiananmen fiasco ([Lanteigne, 2013](#)). It was aimed at sapping the West's effort to contain China with the help of its Asian neighbours. Japan and Taiwan remained exception to its policy framework. And, the US has been successful in putting these counterweights to China's growing Asian influence. Vietnam and Philippines are emerging as counterweights due to South China Sea dispute. China has used its relations with Pakistan as important policy component while dealing with the US challenges in Asia. Pakistan allowed China to inspect the wreckage of the US stealth helicopter that crashed in the Operation that killed Osama bin-Laden. The American factor has a degree of challenges for China. The US with its heavy costs of involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan definitely looks towards China for ameliorating some of its drudgeries. China knowing well tries to induce a Sino-US archetypal framework over South Asian region, hooked into Pakistan. The aim is to prevent India from creating a strategic challenge in South and Southeast Asian region. China has been trying to secure new energy routes both overland and maritime for its trade and energy supply. This is more locationally felt as China focuses on the development of its western parts. These are geographically connected to Pakistan and Afghanistan who can act as fulcrum to augment aforesaid supplies. Since, India has the potential to shift the focus of equilibrium along the conflict management curve. China tries to arrest those capabilities. Afghanistan gives China an opportunity to refurbish its good neighbour policy with aims that go well beyond its peripheral interest. It is using its economic capabilities for creating an infrastructure that links northern Afghanistan with Central Asia and itself. These economic linkages are good enough to divert the TAPI from Mazar-i-Sharif to Kunduz and further in Wakhan corridor which could be the new gateway to China's development plans of Xinjiang. This geopolitical tinkering might have significant impact on energy security issues for the South Asian region. Besides, China believes that it can deal separately with the northern and southern Afghanistan groups. China's dualism might cost significantly to Afghanistan as it has the habit and resources to deal Afghan factions individually. It would not try to pull along with Pakistan on all issues who harbours Taliban and the Haqqani network. It would like to hedge its alliance with Pakistan, a cynosure to many in Afghanistan with its Central Asian framework of working with northern Afghanistan ethnic groups and their Central Asian co-nationals.

### 1.3. Xinjiang – the Achilles heel?

China's 55 officially recognised non-Han minorities constitute 8.49 percent (113.79 million) of the total

population ([Kwon, 2011](#)). China's 90 percent border is inhabited by these minorities, which has strategic implications for cross-border influence. Xinjiang Autonomous Province (XUAR) is the largest and endowed significantly with oil and mineral resources. Xinjiang is the cusp of China's strategic inroads into Central Asia. China has been using larger regional construct the SCO to hone its position on Uyghur discontent. The SCO prior to 9/11 has been specifically dealing with terrorism and both Russia and China see the connection between ethno-religious minorities and terrorism, separatism. The war on terror has allowed China to hard-push its policies in XUAR. China believed that most of the minority discontent is sourced into underdevelopment and lack of access to fruits of collective development. Therefore, the economic development of Xinjiang has been a major priority in order to pacify the sectarian forces. The development became acceptable as an initial argument but then the demographic transition that occurred along with became an important reason for discord. Xinjiang before 1990 had only 37 percent Han population, which rose to 41 percent a decade later. This has affected the cultural and regional characteristics of the Uyghurs ([Clarke, 2012](#)).

The Uyghurs have also faced the backlash of growing China in the form of internal repression especially when the image of China mattered most. The Olympic games of 2008 saw preemptive measure taken against the Uyghurs that brought international attention. The 2009 violence in Urumchi and Shaoguan reveal the simmering unrest against the state policies ([Milward, 2009](#)). The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and World Uyghur Congress (WUC) have been the major mobilising front for the Uyghurs. The repression has wider impact beyond XUAR into Central Asia as well because the minority question is somewhere connected to the religious identity. Even the ethnic question goes beyond the pale of China as Uyghurs claim the Turkic ancestry just as the five Central Asian Republics. The reform and religious revivalism across Central Asia has found its appeal among the Uyghurs as well who wish to see as a legitimate source for ethnic and religious nationalism. The latter represents a major concern because the Central Asian Republics too are getting swayed with larger appeal of religion in formulation of national identity and the growth of these factors present difficulty for China to conduct its Central Asia policy. China wishes to use its influence in Central Asia to cut down support for Uyghur separatists there, but the same is hard to achieve in the Af-Pak region. There is an estimated population of 3, 50,000 Uyghurs in Kazakhstan and nearly 50,000 in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. China has been successful in hunting down the Uyghur rebels in Central Asia and forced closure of Uyghur schools, newspaper, radio and TV programmes ([Shichor, 2008](#)). China's views Uyghur separatism now more a function of religious extremism rather than an ethnic discord. The support it has gathered from Al-Qaeda and other Central Asian radical Islamic outfits forced it singly paint the picture as so. The fact is more significant because for China Uyghur represent a minority religion but for Central Asian Republics it is a majority religion. So, there always is a case for Islam whenever the questions of minorities get addressed in case of Uyghurs. This invites some

degree of involvement from China's western neighbours which include Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Afghanistan (Shichor, 2009).

China's manifest goals in Xinjiang apart from creating a policy framework for negating separatism, terrorism and religious extremism is negating the US hegemony. The terror links create a different scenario where China stops shorts of calling state action against the radical Islamists. It tries then to reinvent the identity of Uyghur separatists even when it targets the religious extremists. This dual approach has its long-term consequences for the Central Asian States would like to work with China on the question of religious extremism. The Uyghur question brings some doubts about this cooperation. On the other hand, the countries of Afghanistan and Pakistan would be willing to hand-over Uyghur separatists, but question of extremism in the name of Islam becomes a subjective question that creates flutter with religious leaders often jumping in the debate. The February 2012 violence marked the high point of concern for Pakistan as the Xinxiang Regional Government Chairman almost accused Pakistan of harbouring the rogue elements of ETIM. The ETIM is part of larger framework managed and funded by Al-Qaeda that works in Pakistan. Another group Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) emerged in 2007 and has been most active in sustaining the Uyghur unrest. There have been proofs of Uyghur militants getting trained in Pakistan and launching attacks in cities of Kashgar and Khotan (Zenn, 2012). The leaders of TIP have also close links with Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Jund-al-Khilafa. China faces the extremism from Turkic jihadists who are often lodged into the tribal agencies in Pakistan. The rising levels of violence can significantly affects China's development plans for XUAR and also create the inter-ethnic tension in this part.

## 2. China's resource geoeconomics

China's geoeconomic foray is endowed with more than a trillion dollar currency reserve and more than 50 billion dollars of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) annually. China's domestic and external political environments see a continuity of Harmonious World Policy. The success of CAFTA (China-ASEAN Free Trade Area) beckons China's geoeconomic interest to remain cardinal to geopolitical goals (Ming-Te & Tai-Ting Liu, 2011). China factors the Millennium Development Goals and the North-South Dialogue into its foreign policy. China's strong economy allows it to increase its imports from various countries, especially, those who constitute source of primary metals and energy minerals. Besides, its aid diplomacy has been successful in Africa. This is in stark contrast to Russia and the US who have weapons sale as a significant element of their global trade. China's economic policy is backed by its preferred practice of multilateralism. Its economic strength paid rich geopolitical dividends during East Asian currency crisis. China's "Harmonious World" (hexie shijie) policy is linked to its doctrine of peaceful rise (Blanchard, 2008). It has led to the translation of its foreign policy into an economic policy, seeking geoeconomic gains as an alibi to hardcore geopolitical interests. But, China's Harmonious World policy seems nearing exhaustion. The periphery of China is raising

the costs of maintaining the harmonious posture in many ways. The US pushes multiple alliances to counter China. And, China came to realise that it has limited friends who can tilt the balance in its favour. Therefore, it looked for global frontiers of geoeconomic approach that can deliver it desired geopolitical goals. It is focus on Afghanistan is a geoeconomic sequel to Central Asia and Africa to get concrete objectives that otherwise seem at doldrums.

### 2.1. The African experience

China's state nationalism is the caressing force behind harmonious world policy. Chinese Communist Party and government are often under stress from popular nationalism, which often feels the impatience when the economic diplomacy gains are soaked by geopolitical stratagems at near periphery. China's resource diplomacy is mutually beneficial to itself and Africa. It is building government buildings, schools, hospitals, and providing academic exchange and technical education. China has also used financial resources to bring rebel groups to negotiating table, viz., Sudan (Zhao, 2013). China's energy needs has driven her for global procurements of energy resources since the dawn of 21st century. China hit pay dirt in Africa and the struck deals with loans offered for a song in Central Asia. The African nations proved to be a very lucrative ground as they needed long-term investments which were reticent in case of the Western countries. China's top trading partners are Angola, Sudan, Nigeria, Egypt and South Africa. Most of the imports are in the form of oil, iron ore and precious and semi-precious metals. In 2011, China-Africa trade stood at \$122 billion, growing almost at a rate of 28 percent in the concluding decade (Chinadaily.com, 2011). China has been good in showing some concern for corporate responsibility, as it has provided schools and hospitals in Angola. It made sure that its presence gets accolades at it built Zambia's largest soccer stadium in Ndola (Germain, 2010). But, there are instances where Chinese investments have been the source of conflict between the state and the displaced peoples, the case of Sudan, where a dam is being built on Nile river (Alessi & Hanson, 2012). Another major issue is the Chinese labour migration that concerns the local people. Ghana had detained hundreds of Chinese gold-mining workers which were imported by Chinese firms from poorer southwest China, such as, Guangxi. Ghana has nearly 10,000 Chinese workers who are being asked to return now (Hille & Rice, 2013). China's economic forays in north Africa received some setback as the Arab Spring made its investments vulnerable. There were nearly 50 odd contracts in Libya secured from Gaddafi regime and many of them came under fire; Sinopec refineries were destroyed (Editorial, 2011). The Islamist now capturing power brings a difficult time for China as its proximity with the erstwhile regimes might be limiting its case in the region. It has already vetoed resolutions on Syria that exposes its presence in North Africa even more.

### 2.2. Central Asian experience

China's presence in Central Asia has been a geopolitical disposition in many writings since the dawn of 20th

century. The 21st century is only a testimony to it. Mackinder's racial scorn about China as 'yellow peril' is one of the most propitious happenings for the current regimes in Central Asia. They have regurgitated their economic and political sinews with generous loans and soft greasing by the Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOE), in lieu of securing lucrative resource exploitation contracts. Also, China is exhausting its manpower in Central Asia for infrastructure creation, something that is a good scheme of repatriation of funds both at corporate and wage levels. China's economic presence has global implications as the transport infrastructure of Central Asia gets connected with Chinese rail-road network, extending the lines of communication across Europe–Asia. The city of Khorog in Kazakhstan is connecting point between Chinese and the erstwhile Soviet Railway system, which ultimately connects Lianyungang to the West European port of Rotterdam (Petersen, 2013). But, China has tried to create a geopolitical divide in the erstwhile Turkestan (or the larger Central Asia). It has been trying to develop Xinjiang, where no doubt most of the benefit is scooped by migrant mainland workers. This prioritisation has led to the identification of choice of projects in Central Asia that can be placed in line with the Xinjiang's development objectives. The larger idea is that the Soviet Central Asia would eventually come under geoeconomic dominion of Chinese Central Asia aka Xinxiang. A fault in perception is bound to reflect in China's trade practices in Central Asia as the latter's investment climate is quite different from Xinjiang. A case can be mentioned where in November 2012 it was reported that a Chinese gold-mining company landed into trouble in Kyrgyzstan where it had to shut off and the whole Chinese staff had to be evacuated (Pantucci, 2012). Central Asian workers have been complaining of underpaid and irregular work conditions in Chinese owned companies and most of them are based in Xinjiang. These apart the stellar success of China has been in securing gas pipelines from Central Asia. The Turkmenistan gas fields are connected to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan gas network which are then further extending to China. At present nearly 10 billion cubic metre of gas from Turkmenistan is being delivered, which would later be raised upto 65 billion cubic metres. China offered 8 billion dollars in soft loan to Turkmenistan and is the only country that has secured onshore production rights. The China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) is developing the gas fields on the eastern side of the Amu Darya river, and the South Yoloton (aka Galkynysh). The Turkmen–Chinese Cooperation Committee (TCCC) is one of the major coordinating bodies that overlooks into Chinese interest in Turkmenistan (Petersen, 2012).

### 3. The Afghan neighbourhood of Central Asia

Central Asian countries are the northern neighbourhood of Afghanistan. Their collective border with Afghanistan is 2087 km, which makes them second largest neighbour after Pakistan, which has 2430 km of contiguous boundary. The Central Asian countries share river Amu Darya with Afghanistan that forms a common boundary with them. The geo-cultural connect runs across Amu Darya in terms of ethnicity and religion. The Amir of Bukhara was in

possession of territories south of Amu Darya, which were wrested by Ahmed Shah Abdali and made Amu Darya as permanent border between the two powers (Barfield, 2010). The Uzbeks, Turkmen, Tajiks are on both sides of the river and have been geopolitically disposed towards influencing states in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Independent Central Asian Republics (CARs) are now more than two decades old since their emergence in the post-Soviet times. Their geopolitical significance came with the scramble for new energy reserves as the third world economies gained bigger shapes. The global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rates since 2002 has been an average 3 percent till 2008 and thereafter it declined marginally. The East Asian and South Asian economies during the same period registered 4 and 7 percent average growth rates respectively (World Development Indicators, 2013). Energy consumption in these economies has gone up by an average 45 percent between 2002 and 2010 period. And, energy imports by East Asian economies has declined whereas for South Asian economies it has rose nearly to one fourth of their total energy use in the same period; though the latter's consumption stands at one fourth of the former. It is thus clear that energy imports for Asian economies remain a high priority and Central Asia's geopolitical significance is trumped by the rising demand of energy in its Asian neighbourhood. The other significant buyer is the European market, but it signifies more of a geopolitical consideration where Russian interests are calibrated against the diversification of European imports. Among the Asian economies, China is the major market for Central Asian energy and India is the second most potent buyer. The major caveat for India is its troubled western neighbourhood, where the world is focussed on rebuilding Afghanistan. The disturbed Af-Pak region scaled down India's prospects for having Central Asian energy to a significant level. This saw at the same time an increased consolidation by China over Central Asian energy reserves. The contracts were secured by China in combo offer of loans and other reciprocated development activities. India on the other relied largely on Russian influence in these countries for securing oil and gas exploration contracts. The Afghanistan factor has influenced both the exporters and the consumers in the region that contributed to geo-economic reappraisal of Central Asian energy resources. The role of Central Asian Republics in stabilising Afghanistan thus is a recursion to their own upscaling of energy business. Thus, Central Asia has vital stakes for its own geopolitical objectives that it contributes to rebuilding Afghanistan. This concern has been visible in numerous steps, viz., six plus two initiative by Uzbek President Karimov and other at various fora. Central Asia provides accessibility and a stable negotiating environment for all major stakeholders in Afghanistan. This caters essentially to Russia, the US and the Chinese interest in the region. India remains an exception at it deals with Afghanistan on its own standing.

#### 3.1. Turko-Islamic geoculture in Transoxiana

Central Asia and Afghanistan have competing histories of Islam. The Arabs introduced Islam in Central Asia under

the rule of Abbasid Caliph al-Mamun. The Karakhanids, a Turkic dynasty were instrumental in popularising Islam by bringing in the cult of saints and preservation of Sogdian traditions within it fold. There emerged Sufism in Khorasan and Transoxiana. The stronghold of Sunni Islam along with the practice of cult became visible characteristics of Islam in Central Asia. Despite this the Shiistic tradition of venerating the Fourth Caliph Hazrat Imam Ali was equally popular in Balkh and other towns. Among one of the most popular things were the Islamic hagiography telling about the mystic powers of saints and their act of dying and getting revived as deity. This is markedly different from the Wahabi Islam, which strictly abhors such references within Islam. Central Asia between 8th to 14th centuries moved from Arab Islam to localised Islam under Seljukids and Karakhanids, and then leading to more secular tendencies in Islamic art and architecture as a result of contact with China and Mediterranean along the Silk route (Suleimanov, 2007). Their geopolitical manifestations can be verified from the Soviet assessment of Jadidism during the Great Game days. They believed that orthodox tradition of Muslim 'maktab' would be better than any dissemination of ideas by reformists (Brower, 1997). The role of ethnicity in defining national identity is well conspicuous as their historic evolution corroborates, but the national culture and quest for symbols from the past remains an elusive task. The Uzbeks for example initially raised Timur – the lame statues and tried to project their past through these symbols, but soon they found themselves confounded with pan-Turkism and Uzbek nationalism (Melvin, 2005). Modern Central Asian Republics have been witnessing Islamism in a new form. The authoritarian regime has been confronting the reformists, who are supported by the Islamists for necessary democratic space. The state has been maintaining tight grip over religious institutions, which is contested by Islamist organisations. Uzbek president Islam Karimov established Tashkent Islamic University, which certifies the training of Imams. The Kyrgyz government has been using anti-Islamist tirade to press hard its Uzbek populations, who seek opposition space (McGlinchey, 2005). The role of civil religion in Central Asia soon became necessary not only to keep the masses insular from the influence of political Islam but also to preserve the communication with the West. These brought forth a degree of secularising tendencies while embracing the identity of Islam. The reaction to this has been visible in the form of rising Sunni Wahabism amongst the traditional sections of Central Asian society and also the missionary Islam, represented by Tabligi Jamat (Balci, 2012).

Apart from Islam the Turkic culture of Central Asia has an important bearing on relations with neighbouring region. The influence dates long back to 6th century when numerous Turkic tribes settled in Western China and practiced Tengri or Shamanism. Their contact with Buddhism and Islam led to their further dispersal in the Inner Asian lands. The political identity of Turkish rule was confined to Central Asian empires which emerged from 10th to 14th century. However, the Turkish identity received considerable fillip with the rise of Ottoman Empire. The Turkophone people of Inner Asia were simulated by their inter-group linkages under the Empire and it led to

political consciousness apart from the growth of trade, cultural and art. This had a unique combination under the Russian rule in Central Asia. The Russians introduced Soviet ideology in these Turkic lands and it led to fundamental changes in their societies. Central Asia became a land of converging ideas from the Ottoman and Russian streams. It gave the sense that though Ottomans were sovereign, the Russians did not seek enslavement of the Turks in Central Asia (Laruelle, 2009). The communist ideology played an important role in localisation of Turkic culture in all manifestations of modernity, progress and economic welfare. The quest for modernist perspective of Islam also began and it brought differences with the West Asian form of Islam. In fact, for much more reasons the South Asia offered much source and inspiration to the religious scholars from Central Asia who would train themselves under the Deobandi School located in North India. A unique blend of Islam and communism emerged in the region and even the Bukharan Communist Party (BCP) sought alliances in 1921 to most of the Turkic states and also to Afghanistan. In fact, Russian agreed to have a Peoples Soviet Republic of Bukhara in the aftermath of October Revolution. The Uzbek language was declared official though much of the work was in Persian. The Turkic identity was liquidated in 1924 Turkestan Commission for reorganisation Central Asian lands as ethno-national landscapes (Khalid, 2011). Post-Soviet Central Asia definitely carries the inertia of Turkic identity and Islam as major geopolitical factors impinging in the region.

#### 4. Narco-terrorism and migration

Afghan opiates generated \$61 billion of illicit funds in 2009. In 2009, the Afghan Taliban was estimated to have earned \$150 million from the opiate trade, Afghan drug traffickers \$2.2 billion, and Afghan farmers \$440 million. Though Taliban only tax the trade, now they have started procuring the precursor chemicals, such as, acetic anhydride. The opium trade is good enough to make serious dent to Central Asian economies. Nearly 260 tonnes of acetic anhydride destined for Afghanistan was seized in Central Asia between 1995 and 2000. Paris Pact unites more than 50 States and international organisations to fight against Afghan opiates (INCS Report, 2010). It is further devolved into Triangular initiative (involving Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan) and the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre (CARICC) and Operation TARCEP. Removal of trade barriers is an important facilitator of drug trafficking. There are global routes emanating from Afghanistan through Central Asia. Afghan heroin is trafficked into China and Russian Federation before moving along the 'Northern Route' across Eastern Europe, Northern Europe and into Western and Central Europe. There was a massive 148 percent rise in drug seizures from Central Asia between 1999 and 2009. There was 365 tonnes of heroin trafficked from Afghanistan of which 90 tonnes was trafficked from Central Asia (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) (UNODOC, 2011). Most of it was transported through Russian Federation, but local consumption was alarmingly high at 11 tons. Afghan opium enters mostly via Tajikistan–Afghanistan border despite being numerous

checks as drug cartels are active. Uzbekistan is the next preferred route, while Turkmenistan is least preferred, due to flat terrain and strong government enforcement risks detection. Due to this Kyrgyzstan is more lucrative conduit owing to its political conditions. Thereafter, Russia and China are the sought destinations. Central Asia is now witnessing increasing drug cartelisation of criminal groups. The kinship structures become vital conduit for trafficking and recruiting networks. Drug abuse is highest in Uzbekistan followed by Kazakhstan and it is lowest in Tajikistan (UNODOC, 2010).

Afghan conflict has typically seen the movement of migrants to neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. And, those who have resources and education seek refuge in Western countries. A fraternity also brings in many Afghans to India. But, Central Asia is also appearing as an important destination for many Afghans. They are comfortable there because of less violence and culturally it represents a Muslim society, where some degree of membership on that account is affordable. There is a fear that after the international forces leave Afghanistan, Central Asia could be the most probable destination for many Afghans, especially, the non-Pashtuns (Fergananeews.com, 2013). Most of the Afghans in Central Asia would wish to see a resettlement into lucrative destinations, such as, North America or Australia. Tajikistan has numerous refugees coming from cities of northern Afghanistan, like, Kunduz and Mazar-i-Sharif. The ethnic background becomes important and in this case it is largely the Tajiks from northern Afghanistan who have been seeking asylum in Tajikistan. Among the Afghan refugee in Pakistan only 7.3% were Tajiks in 2005 (Irinnews.org, 2004). Afghans in Kyrgyzstan are coming as migrants, students, business people and refugees largely located in the urban areas, like Osh, Bishkek and Jalalabad. Many of them have settled and married Azerbaijani, Kyrgyz, Ukrainian or Russian woman. Several have also been granted citizenship. The Dostum foundation has been sending students to American University of Central Asia (AUCA), Bishkek. The refugees mention ideology (communism) as a major cause of seeking shelter. But, largely the secure environment and stable living conditions attract most of the Afghans (Kazemi, 2013).

## 5. Economic and energy linkages

Afghanistan served as gateway to littoral Asia for Silk route trade passing across Central Asia. The reason holds perennially good as the US looks for a revival of those links that can form the basis for sustained economic development of Afghanistan and the region at large. The Heart of Asia Process is being a regional initiative that is aimed at reviving the spirit of Silk Route with special focus on trade, transit, energy and communication routes (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Afghanistan, 2012). The initiative extends from Turkey to China. The first meeting held in Istanbul readied the roadmap, where Afghanistan was not to be seen as roundabout but a significant diver of economic growth in the region. The economic empowerment precedes the political and strategic empowerment of the Afghan State. Heart of Asia Conference brought together nearly 40 countries and international organisations that

matter to the future of stable Afghanistan (The Hindu, 2013). A significant challenge in years to come is the justifiable appropriation of water resources, namely, hydrogeopolitics. Central Asia has been in the grip of these conflicts, with lower riparian states of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan pressuring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to abandon their upstream hydel projects (Coskun, 2004). Already there is opposition to Tajik Rogun hydel project and Kyrgyz Upper-Naryn power plants. Germany has come to assistance with the launch of Central Asia Water Initiative (Berlin Process) for transboundary water management. The situation is not far when this might involve Afghanistan into the regional muddle. "According to research officer Omar Nesar, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russia, founder of Analytic Centre for Modern Afghanistan Studies, Moscow, Afghan officials believe rivers starting in Afghanistan unfairly flow into other countries and they should build dams to keep water in the country. But is it a right way out?" (Dudka, 2013). The physical connections between Central Asia and Afghanistan remained seasonal during the Cold War. It remained open when the two sides on friendly terms and remained closed otherwise. The post-Cold war period saw variegated options exercised by individual neighbours. For example, during the Taliban occupation it was only Turkmenistan who maintained steady contact with the Afghan state (Radio Liberty, 2011). The Friendship Bridge at Khairaton marks an important cross-over which was opened in 2002. The Airtom Customs Complex was opened in Termex in 2003. Uzbekistan is playing vital role in electricity and transportation to Afghanistan. The rail lines between Hairatan and Mazar-i-Sharif have been laid, and are operated since 2011 (Laruelle, Peyrouse, & Axyonova, 2013). Tajikistan is next important player with surplus electricity that it wishes to supply to South Asia; Afghanistan would be inevitable beneficiary. The CASA-1000 will connect Tajik power generating plant to cities of Afghanistan, like, Kunduz, Baghlan, Pul-i-Kumri and Kabul (Starr & Farhadi, 2012). Turkmenistan has also restored the Soviet era cross-border rail link between Kushka and Turghundi. It is allowing more people to people contact along the border. Besides, its supply of electricity and facilitating NATO supplies makes it a vital partner. Kazakhstan though does not share border, but its economic pull is good enough as it is the biggest trading partner with Afghanistan among the 5 Central Asian Countries.

## 6. The three geopolitical vectors

China's Afghanistan policy is an interesting mix of multi-vector approach to Afghan question. The first vector aims at bilateral policy framework with the Central Asian countries neighbouring, which can be the direct link to its economic ventures in the country. The second vector seeks larger convergence with Russia as it also serves an effective deterrence to growing US influence in the region. China being wary of Russian interests would like to work with under the SCO framework. The third vector is its direct rapport with the Taliban and the Haqqanis in Pakistan. This tier appears to have gained importance of recent, but it essentially serves the Chinese interest in Khyber Pakhtunwa in Pakistan as many Afghan groups are active in

this part of the region and China has a history of co-thinking them with Pakistan as strategic assets (Schofield, 2011). But, China is little apprehensive of Pakistan's democratic leadership as it has traditionally been comfortable with the dictators for pursuing its goals. The three vectors can be surmised as follows.

### 6.1. Central Asia-northern Afghanistan vector

Central Asian republics have been a hot destination for FDIs (Foreign Direct Investment) since their independence. The major reason has been their natural resources. The pipelines and the transport corridor sum up their resource geopolitics in post-Soviet period. They are being laid in the east by China, in the west by the US led western powers, and eagerly sought in the south by Iran, Pakistan and India. Major Chinese firms, viz., China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation (SINOPEC) and Petro are working with Central Asian Oil companies like, KazMunaiGaz (Kazakhstan), Uzbekneftgaz (Uzbekistan) for supply of Central Asian oil and gas reserves. Turkmenistan has been supplying nearly a fifth of China's gas consumption as of 2012 (Fazilov & Chen, 2013). China's success story is testified by the Central Asia–China gas pipeline launched in 2003 and the CAREC-5, 3 and 6 corridors effectively link Kabul to Chinese province of Xinjiang. The corridors and pipeline in Central Asia indicate the primacy of natural resources in global geopolitics. These corridors are now further being developed and extended into Afghanistan. The northern Afghanistan has the energy reserves which are currently being explored and developed by CNPCC. The northern Afghanistan is also a vital geostrategic corridor as it links China with West Asia directly, via Herat and Mashad. The major challenge for China in adhering to this channel is the cross-border influences that might affect transnational security of Xinjiang (Kerr & Swinton, 2008). The role of pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism can grow to higher levels that can affect China's geoeconomic goals adversely in the region.

### 6.2. The Russia-SCO vector

China has been focussing on geoeconomic consolidation by granting loans and expanding its presence by raising infrastructure, however, it stands calibrated to the Russian presence in Central Asia, which is more effective in conditioning the regional geopolitics. China and Russia have one fundamental agreement in Eurasia that is to deny the US any influence in Central Asia. This basic strategy has been quite in tune to what Brzezinski had foretold about the geopolitical significance of Eurasia for the US to remain a superpower (Brzezinski, 1998). The ontological history of SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) has been testimony to big efforts by China in placating the discontent with all its western neighbours on border issue. This has been largely a coalition of Russia–China, to which Brzezinski indicated, with Iran only remaining to join as mentioned as by him. Russia has been providing the balancing act so far as the US influence in Eurasia is concerned. It has pegged it with its own influence in the

Eastern Europe, where NATO has been eager to expand by bringing Georgia, Ukraine and Azerbaijan. Russia allows the US to use its territory for its defence shipments to Afghanistan through what has been termed as the Northern Distribution Network (NDN). This is a showcase to what could be an ultimate realising of dream network of Modern Silk Road. Russia has been monopolising the geopolitical space as it pressurises the Central Asian States not to allow ground presence of the US troops by leasing out bases. Russia provided almost 1 billion dollars worth of arms to Kyrgyzstan. It also has been a major security guarantor for Tajikistan. There is discord on transit facilities that are being sought by the US in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. China also believes that this would allow US to influence these states that might be detrimental to its own geopolitical space. Therefore, China and Russia work in the framework of SCO to deny US any anchorage in Central Asia. China might use the SCO framework for extending its Afghanistan policy as it has several advantages. It hedges China against the Islamist threats and also significantly addresses the challenge of pan-Turkism. It allows China to widen the objectives of its Afghanistan policy vis-a-vis US hegemony. However, the Russian influence within the SCO has its irredentism which might affect the Chinese prioritisation of the SCO objectives. A case is evident when the Central Asian States refused to fall in line with Russia on recognising independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. China believes that Russia might use the SCO as forum for pushing ethno-political objectives that might eventually backfire given its own minorities in search of regional support (Crisisgroup.org, 2013). Therefore, it has narrowed down its SCO agenda on Afghanistan with the creation of the SCO Afghanistan Contact group. China has been in consonance with Russia on co-preservation of the authoritarian regimes that are being fed with luscious payments of royalties and liberal funds so they do not veer away from pre-dated set of goals. There is also energy question and China see NATO allies as potential threat to its energy diplomacy. The only success NATO can claim has been the BTC oil pipeline. The NABUCCO gas pipeline has run into rough weather due to stoppage of production from Shah Deniz fields. It is very likely that Afghan energy reserves would be a part of resource-transport corridor would eventually connect to China's Xinjiang province. Central Asian gas is now largely devoted to Russia–China–Iran trio as the majority of the contracts with Turkmenistan have been secured by these three players (Bhadrakumar, 2010).

### 6.3. The Pakistan vector

Afghanistan has an ever binding relationship with Pakistan. This indelible fact has been one of the reasons that prompted Pakistan to go for the concept of strategic depth compensating its truncated geography. The boundary with Pakistan starts from Pamir knot in the northernmost point edging on Wakhan Corridor. This moves southward along eastern part of Hindukush through Dir and Swat region then leading way through Safed Koh ranges in Kurram Agency. The Suleiman mountains and Waziristan hills form the lower southwest portion of the boundary. The Khyber Pakhtunwa (previously known as



North-West Frontier Province) has been area inhabited by Pashtun tribal groups which extend into south-east Afghanistan provinces. This contiguity of terrain and tribes has been the fulcrum of Pakistan's geopolitical depth into Afghan affairs. The Abbotabad raid was a kind of severe jolt to Pakistan's fortitude with which it has endured the South Asian balance of power. Its relationship with the West sank fathomed depths and there came another major detour in Pakistan's foreign policy. It went for an open embrace of China recalling their long-standing all-weather friendship. Pakistan was well intent upon telling the US that it has started looking for alternatives as the raid signified a major breach of trust. It albeit reflexively signified that the US hitherto onwards is going to work more closely with India, especially on the Afghan issue (Smith, 2011). This brought China as an important actor on the Af-Pak scene. China has been enabling Pakistan's military capabilities in order to shift South Asian balance of power in favour of Pakistan. The zest for geopolitical autonomies in South Asia has got China deeply engaged with and into Pakistan's tribal areas. China has been the earliest supplier of weapons to Afghan mujahideens. It has got an understanding with the Afghan Islamist parties who hold significant clout over militant groups. But of late there has been a new challenge to Sino-Pak friendship ties. The all-weather ties have struck rough terrain with the Uyghur militants taking shelter in FATA region of Pakistan. These have support of Tehrik i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Al-Qaeda. The strike hard campaign of China has brought itself into notice of these groups who have the ability to strike at Chinese interest in Pakistan. There are roughly 10,000 Chinese in Pakistan who work in various development projects and mining industries. The Gwadar port and Karakoram Highway have been the mega-projects taken up the Chinese State-owned Firms. The Hair-Ruba Special Economic Zone (SEZ) has been China's first overseas economic zone near Lahore (Hartpence, 2011). However, the presence of the Chinese nationals has been targeted by the extremists (Duchtel, 2011). China would like to implement its Afghanistan policy in such a manner so that it also takes care of its interest in Pakistan as well. Therefore, one facet could be that it is seen as an Af-Pak policy. This is seen as a baseline then one of the important conditions that China would secure from Pakistan might be the repression of those hard-line elements who are working against the state of Afghanistan and Pakistan. These are the potential elements who might resent Chinese presence in mining areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. There is also increased military protection being sought by Chinese firms in Pakistan.

## 7. Conclusion

China's Afghanistan policy betrays initial stage of congealment. It is weighing options against the backdrop of historic experience. However, there are altogether new set of players in the 'Great' game. The quest would be largely governed by the scale at which China pegs its geopolitical goals only then it would be able to ratchet up its Afghanistan policies. There are talks even with the seeming opponents, such as, the US and even India. Both, India and China would wish that the land does become a breeding

ground of extremism and Islamist guerrilla training ground. However, China needs to layout blue print for its presence in Afghanistan, unlike India and the US who already have their presence. China cannot emulate solely Russia also as the latter has so many proxy interest groups in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Russia serves as geopolitical bridge to the NATO supplies, which China rejects as an option, for now. Therefore, China's Afghanistan policy can be seen as multi-vector proposition that would hedge its presence against putative risks and increase its economies of scale.

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