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New Great Game under the guise of War against Terrorism

Abstract

This article is based on the argument that the New Great Game is being played under the guise of war against terrorism in the South and Central Asia. The geo-strategic location and presence of huge untapped energy reserves have initiated a tough geo-political competition among the existing super power United States, future super power China and re-emerging Russia. This assumption seems correct as before the September 11, 2001, the US was not having any boots on the ground in this region to contain China and Russia, to soften orthodox Iran and to keep nuclear power Pakistan under check. The rationale of this article is based on the theoretical framework of Heartland Theory, crystalizing the diverging interests of regional stakeholders. The method of analysis is based on documents analysis.

Key Words: New Great Game, Geopolitics, Energy Politics, War against Terrorism, Hegemony.

Introduction

The Soviet disintegration created a political vacuum in the Central Asia. The US which was not having its presence in this region, considered this a golden opportunity and put this region in its Area of Responsibility (AOR) and started to bring structural modification in the political and socio-economic spheres of the newly independent states.¹ Experts were surprised to see this situation and couldn't find any solid reason behind this US initiative. The situation was like a smoke screen and they were not able to peep into it to find the real objectives of the US policy in this region. Then the 9/11 happened and things started to get clear. Without going into the details of who caused and how was caused that atrocity; the only conclusion that could be derived is who got the ultimatum advantage out of it. The straight answer is the US which capitalized this opportunity to extend its global agenda in the region. Although on 7th February, 2015, a report published by a Russian newspaper claimed that the Russian President Vladimir Putin has collected a body of evidence to prove that the US government and the intelligence agencies were involved in plotting the 9/11 atrocity. This report claimed that there were solid reasons to believe that it was basically an inside job and satellite images are being

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collected to prove this.²The presence of huge untapped and unexplored energy reserves in Central Asia and its geographical location stimulate strong geo-political competition among America, Russia and China. This competition is known as New Great Game.³

The Great Game

The 19th century was characterized by the geopolitical rivalry between the British and Russian empires known as the Great Game. It started between the Russian and British empires in 1826 and ended in 1919. The term “Great Game” was for the first time used in 1826 but got popularity by the historical novel “KIM” published in 1901 by Rudyard Kipling.⁴ Afghanistan was then the real playground where the game was going on. The Russian empire used to face a trade dilemma during the 19th century. It was having huge tracts of fertile land known as the food basket of the world. However whatever agricultural products were produced, the empire was not able to export them as most of its seaports used to remain in freezing conditions round the year. In order to regulate its trade, the Tsarist Russia was willing to have an access to the warm waters of the South. With this strategy, the Russian empire was increasing its area of influence in Afghanistan. The subcontinent at that time was under the control of the British Empire. The Russian were willing to come down whereas the British were willing to contain them in Afghanistan⁵. This is how their Great Game started and Afghanistan became the epic-center of this competition. In order to control Afghanistan, the British Empire waged three wars in 1838-42, 1878-80 and 1919 and lost all of them.⁶ This rivalry ended in 1919⁷ when both empires decided to join hand in hand against their common enemy Germany during the First World War and agreed to recognize Afghanistan as a buffer zone.⁸

The New Great Game

The New Great Game started in the last decade of 20th century. This time the region is the same as that of the great game but the players are somewhat changed. Afghanistan is still the epicenter of the new geo-political rivalry. Experts have defined it as **the arrangement and sequence of events happening in the South and Central Asia according to the will of United States**. The New Great Game is considered as the first phase of the US Grand Strategy. The main objective of this game is to maintain the US hegemony by containing China and reemerging Russia and to control hydrocarbon reserves and their pipeline routes to the work market.⁹ After the Soviet disintegration, the US decided to fill the political vacuum in newly independent states and put five “stan” states in its AoR.¹⁰ The whole world was astonished to see why the US has took the responsibility of these chaotic states and decided to provide social, economic and political and military aid, loans and assistance to the CARs. The 9/11 provided the US with the opportunity to stay here and control the dynamics of the whole region. The important actors of this game are the US, China and Russia and regional states such as Pakistan, Iran and India have also become important stakeholders because of their national interests and geographic proximity.¹¹ The success of this game is somehow attached with the role and resistance of Pakistan: higher the resistance less the chances of success; less resistance, more chances of success. In order to have agenda being accomplished, Pakistan is very systematically dragged into the war on terror and the demands of

“do more, do more” have at one time made the whole Pakistan a victim of bomb blasts and terrorist activities.

Mackinder’s Heartland: Theoretical Framework

Sir Halford J. Mackinder was the main proponent of the Heartland Theory. He, in 1904, predicted that who will control the “Heartland” will control the whole world.¹² His theory is still relevant in the twenty-first century and his geopolitical prediction proved accurate enough throughout the 20th century. Mackinder’s theory of Heartland has provided the theoretical and philosophical grounds for the foreign policy of United States during the Cold War and it is still providing the rationale and justifying the New Great Game. The lens of Heartland Theory provide the justification why the New Great Game is going on and how great powers are trying to get their national interests.

Hydrocarbon Reserves and New Great Game

A significant theme of the game is to control hydrocarbon reserves and their pipeline routes to the world market. To control reserves and routes is not just to fulfill the energy needs rather it is directly attached with the maintenance of the US hegemony in the world. Global trade of oil is connected with exchange rate of dollar. The Petro Dollar has been the back bone of the US led international economy since 1945 but now this supremacy is being challenged by the “Petro Yuan” connection.¹³

The strategic importance of Central Asia and abundance of untapped energy reserves have made it a playground of the game and the nodal points of this competition are located in Afghanistan and Pakistan. As stated earlier, the 9/11 incident has proven a blessing in disguise for the US which it has utilized to the maximum. The United States has been executing the New Great Game under the guise of war against terrorism in the region.

Crude Oil (the black gold) is the lifeline of world’s economy. Geologists say that Nature took 500 million years to produce the oil reserves but mankind will consume them within 200 years oil.¹⁴ The energy experts have predicted that the peak of oil is already insight and major world oil reserves will start to diminish in next two to three decades.¹⁵ It is estimated that the world’s demand is predicted to grow by 50% in the current decade.¹⁶ It has been witnessed that out of 48 largest oil producing countries, 33 have reported decline of their oil production.¹⁷ Gone are the days when energy resources especially oil was available on cheap rates. The era of plentiful and low-cost petroleum is approaching to an end. The cutoff date is almost irrelevant as commercially viable mitigation options will take much longer than decades to become effective, because of the enormous scale of world oil consumption.¹⁸

According to the OPEC Report 2013, “from the world’s total trillion barrels of oil, 9 percent are found in Central and Latin America, 6 percent are in North America, 2 percent in Europe, 7 percent in Africa, 6 percent in the former Soviet Union and 4% in Asia Pacific.¹⁹ Today, from world’s total oil reserves, 66% are found in Middle East region. [Saudi Arabia](#) is the largest oil producing and exporting country with 25% of world’s total oil, [Iraq](#) 11%, [Kuwait](#) 9%, [UAE](#) 9%, [Iran](#) 8%, and [Libya](#) 2%.

Is it a coincidence that all the major oil producing countries of Middle East, South America and Arab world are falling prey to the US designs? Iraq, the second largest oil producer has been destroyed on the lame excuse of the weapon of mass destruction. Iraqi puppet government is providing cheap oil to the US companies which are earning billion dollars profit. About Syrian crises, Russia has already said that the US is involved in the international banditry of oil in Syria. Peace over there now seems a dream. What happened to Libya is not a hidden secret anymore?

Most of the countries in OPEC have already declared that their reserves have already faced peak and decreased their share of oil production in the global market.²¹In this scenario, the Central Asia which is known because of its huge untapped and unexplored oil reserves has become a pivot point of new great game in this region

Geo-strategic Importance of the Central Asia

Once Brzezinski said, “the countries of the CARs represent a chess board where New Great Game is being conducted by great powers, mainly the United States, Russia, and China”.²² After the Soviet disintegration the whole region is facing a race for energy resources and control over strategic locations and supply line routes from Central Asia to the world market.²³Kazakhstan has about 18.4 trillion cubic meters of gas and 10 billion tons of oil reserves. Turkmenistan shares almost 600 mile border with the Persian Iran. Three important central Asian states Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan share 3000 miles borders with China. Turkmenistan has the fourth largest gas reserves in the world whereas Kazakhstan has the largest oil reserves in this region.²⁴

The United States and the War on Terror

The war on terrorism helped the US to have its boots on ground of Heartland. Now settling very close to China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan, the US is in a position to control the dynamics of the whole region. Some experts have termed the presence of the US in Afghanistan a part of the grand strategy.²⁵They believe that this grand strategy is revolving around maintaining the US global hegemony and control of global energy reserves and their supply lines to the world market. President Trump in negotiations with Taliban wants to have a peace settlement in which the presence of the US forces would be ensured after withdrawal in Afghanistan. Holding grounds in the pivot of Central and South Asia, the US wants to exploit trillion dollars of energy reserves and other precious minerals. In the name of terrorism, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are waged by the US to get the aforementioned objective. Using Afghanistan as the base camp, the United States is trying to install puppet governments while bringing regime change in most of the Central Asian states and Iran. The US does not want to see Moscow’s monopolization on energy reserves and pipeline routes to Europe.²⁶

Through the friendly governments in the Gulf, the US controls the oil reserves in the region.²⁷ The statistical assessment revealed that by 2040 the Gulf oil would be very close to its end. The US presence in the region could be considered a preemptive move to get continuous supply of oils beyond 2050. It also aims to ensure global hegemony by containing China and Russia. Oil and gas are not just commodities traded in international markets, control over territory and resources are strategic assets used by great powers against their adversaries.²⁸

The existing geopolitics of Afghanistan is not the byproduct of 9/11 only, its roots go back to the post-soviet era. Two American companies i.e., Bidas and Unocal were planning to build two pipelines: one for oil and other for gas from Turkmenistan to Indian Ocean. Taliban regime, apparently, was comfortable with UNOCAL's proposal and negotiations were started as well. With the arrival of Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan and the 1998 bombings of the US embassy in Nairobi by al-Qaeda changed everything. President Bill Clinton ordered missile attacks at Al-Qaeda bases in Afghanistan.²⁹ In order to accomplish the desires to control hydrocarbon reserves of Central Asia through Afghanistan, the US government was in search of an excuse to attack Afghanistan and the opportunity came in the shape of 9/11.³⁰ This whole scenario helps to understand how the UN mandated ISAF was replaced with the NATO.

The following details explain the truth behind the war against terror and the losses faced by Pakistan. After becoming the frontline state against terrorism, the staggering economy of Pakistan incurred the loss of more than US\$ 123.13 billion.³¹ Under the coalition support fund, the US and allies gave only US\$ 33.4 billion. From which 44% Pakistan got for the services rendered to support Washington's anti-terror operations in Afghanistan. So there is no comparison the aid given to Pakistan as an ally and the losses incurred by Pakistan in this war.³²

During 2005-2015, more than 81,860 civilian and personals of law enforcement agencies have lost their lives in Pakistan.³³ Pakistan has paid a heavy cost of being the frontline state the war against terrorism. Due to bad law and order situation, the foreign direct investment is at the lowest ebb. The announcements made by successive United States' government regarding the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan have always been an election drama world witnessed after every 4 years. The Trump administration started its tenure with a military surge and negotiations with Taliban are yet to bring any result. The stalemate in negotiations shows that the US never wanted to leave an important base in the region. Nobody can believe that \$5.6 trillion were spent by the US in the war on terror³⁴ just to kill or arrest the terrorists in Afghanistan?

Pipelines Politics in the Central Asia:

One of the cornerstones of the US policy in this region is to eliminate the Russian monopoly on the supply routes.³⁵ The project of TAPI for South Asia was proposed by the United States. The US has supported the developments of new supply lines such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and South Caucasus supply lines to Europe.³⁶ The US is also supporting a Nabucco project to provide uninterrupted supply of gas to Central Europe. On the east of the Caspian, the US is also promoting supply lines from Central Asia to Europe. These gas projects will connect Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan under the Caspian Sea to Europe.³⁷ The above mention projects are few to mention here but clearly reflecting that Central Asia is an important region where new great game is going on.

Reemerging Russia

Energy has been core of Russian foreign policy and a great lever against Europe. Russia is the former master and the biggest trading partner of each of the Central

Asian Republics. Whatever the existing infrastructure of pipelines is existing is made by the former Soviet Union so Moscow is still dominating these pipelines routes. This is again a fact that Russian pipelines are the most economical for Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan to export their energy reserves.³⁸ Azerbaijan is also using Russian infrastructure to export energy reserves. Central Asian Republics are heavily depending on Russian Black sea port for import and export purposes.³⁹

The US presence is perceived by Russia threat to its security and monopoly over pipelines routes. Washington sponsored BTC pipeline project is taken as a great threat to Russian interests in the region.⁴⁰ Russia through the south stream project is providing gas to Europe through Black Sea. To counter these US sponsored pipelines, Russia has initiated a number of projects such as Nord Stream, Nord Stream 2, Turk Stream, Yamal Pipeline, etc. These projects will lessen the United States dictation on gas and oil exports to Europe and would be more economical and easy way for the CARs' exports. All these pipelines would be pumping Russian gas to different European countries. The US has strongly opposed Nord Stream 2 project at the highest level of NATO meetings with European countries.⁴¹

Future Super Power China

China is emerging super power and a key player in the game. As stated earlier, the US strategy is to contain the future super power China from becoming a new hegemon. China has already become the second largest economy of the world pushing Japan and Germany behind and posing a serious threat to the US economic hegemony in the world.⁴² China is making frantic efforts to ensure uninterrupted supply of energy resources to maintain sustained progress and development. Under the SCO platform, China has started to develop an energy corridor between the Central Asian Republics and its western territories.

Beijing believes that its energy and security requirements would only be fulfilled when its neighboring states would be at peace. It has strengthened economic, trade, military and political relations with the CARs⁴³. On the other side, the US has established military bases in Afghanistan and the CARs. It is also helping India to counterbalance China's influence in the region.⁴⁴

China's BRI is being considered as a counter response to the US global agenda. Under the BRI, China has purposed six corridors; the CPEC is one of them.⁴⁵ The CPEC, a bundle of projects, aims to provide security through economic development. The CPEC and the BRI projects will provide rapid access to other continents of the world.⁴⁶ Around 152 countries are envisioned to be integrated with the BRI Initiatives. Beijing is changing its military position in Asia slowly but very skillfully.⁴⁷ China considers deep sea water Gwadar port of Pakistan as an indispensable part of the multibillion-dollars project of CPEC. China has also decided to become more assertive in the region. The emergence of IS in Afghanistan has alarmed China to look after its western borders especially Xinjiang region. Beijing believes that President Ashraf Ghani govt. cannot ensure peace in the country that's why it has established relations with Taliban for any possible arbitration between different stakeholders. China is aware of the US and Indian opposition of BRI and CPEC. It has invited Afghanistan to be a part of this mammoth project. Beijing has shown its grave concerns on Washington's future designs in the region and demanded the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

India

While sitting in Afghanistan, India is trying to marginalize Pakistan, helping the US to contain China and to enhance trade activities with the Central Asia Republics. Delhi has been pressuring Pakistan from eastern front and this fact is being acknowledged by Indian Army Chief Bipin Rawat in March, 2018 as well.⁴⁸ The US wants its strategic partner and ally India to counter China in the region. India has heavily invested in the infrastructure of Afghanistan and has become one of the biggest donors of Afghanistan.⁴⁹ Since 2001, Delhi has given Afghanistan more than \$2 billion aid to support Kabul government. Modi offered \$1 billion in economic assistance during 2016. In June 2016, Modi inaugurated a \$290 million hydroelectric dam project, and inaugurated Afghanistan's new parliament complex in Kabul in December same year. India provided \$90 million funds for this complex.⁵⁰ Now, it has become crystal clear that India is watering dissidents' groups in Pakistan.

The Indian posturing of "Free Balochistan" coincidentally aligns with the US' grand strategy on Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. The arrest of 'Indian spy' Kulbhushan Yadav from Balochistan and his confession of involvement in terror activities in Pakistan is a solid proof of Indian cross-border terrorism. Pakistan's western border has become insecure due to Indian presence in Afghanistan. India has also ensured its presence in the Central Asia by establishing military bases in Tajikistan.⁵¹ India has been involved in financing terrorist activities, providing training and equipment to different dissident groups in Balochistan.⁵² India's trade interests in the Central Asia, partnership with the US and animosity with Pakistan is making it a key player in the game.

Pakistan

Pakistan is in the eye of storm. There seems a direct link between the US regional agenda and changing dynamics in Pakistan. After the loss of \$ 123.13 billion⁵³ and 81,860 precious lives⁵⁴, Pakistan is still being accused by the US of a double game and continuously asked for "Do More". The US regional agenda is passing through the different stages and Pakistan is finding itself a victim of great power rivalry. It is said that a strong Pakistan would become a big hindrance against the US designs in the region that's why Washington does not want to see it strong and stabilized country. So with a systematic scheme, the war on terror has been shifted from Afghanistan to Pakistan. The US agenda is to make Pakistan heavily engaged with its increasing social, political and economic and religious cleavages. With a very systemic scheme, the US war has been shifted from Afghanistan to Pakistan. Borders have become insecure; social and political differences are becoming very evident. Political instability is making foreign investors afraid. Pakistan Army, despite heavy losses, is trying to bring law and order under control.

After shifting the center of evil in Pakistan, the demands and pressures of "do more" incurred huge economic and human losses to Pakistan. The tireless sacrifices of the whole nation ensured the survival of Pakistan. When the enemies saw that Pakistan has risen again from the crises, they have waged hybrid warfare against Pakistan weakening the ideological basis of the state while highlighting ethnolinguistic differences and putting the sanctity of important institutions under

question. Plan was to declare Pakistan a failed state and ultimately neutralizing Pakistan by saving its nuclear devices from “terrorists” and removing a permanent threat to US designs in the region.

The very war on terror has devastated Pakistan’s already struggling economy. It is evident the US is not willing to see afghan issue being resolved and peace restored. On one side the US is pressurizing Pakistan to do more or play a role in bringing Taliban to negotiations but the reality is many times when Pakistan tried to play an important role, it was sabotaged by one way or the other. For instance on 30th June, 2013 when Pakistan was actively pursuing peace process then the news of Mulla Omer’s death was on aired by Indian media and the whole process was destroyed. Secondly when the prospects of peace were very high again the death of Mulla Akhtar Mansoor on Pakistan territory in a drone strike brought the whole process to standstill. Now when peace talks with Taliban were going on, an abrupt announcement by President Trump to call off negotiations again affirmed the real US agenda behind the talks.

The US objections on the CPEC, opposition to Iran gas pipeline, criticism on Pak-Sino nuclear deal, Do More demands, withdrawal of military and economic aid and many other things have made the peoples believe that the US is not willing to see Pakistan a prosperous country. On the other side, the US has given India, despite Pakistan’s s reservations, a greater role in Afghanistan which is involved in state terrorism against Pakistan

Pakistanis has decided to diversify its cooperation with Russia as well. Moscow, after being ditched by Delhi in 2005, has decided to start military and economic cooperation with Pakistan.⁵⁵China’s trillion dollars project of Belt and Road has totally checkmated the US grand strategy in Asia. The CPEC is becoming a Chinese version of Marshall Plan for regional prosperity, assisting Pakistan to revive its economy. To offset it, India has invested half a billion dollars in Chahbahar port of Iran.⁵⁶

The involvement of external agencies in Balochistan is not a hidden fact now. Experts believe that the game is in full swing in the largest province of Pakistan and this geostrategic important province has become the real playground of this great power rivalry. Balochistan has great importance and role in the US Grand Strategy for this region. For the US, it has wider interests in what is going on in Balochistan. History is the witness that the US has always achieved its interests by disintegrating large states, redrawing borders between some of them, and carving up new political entities all over the world.⁵⁷ The maps issued by some international media outlets of the proposed greater Balochistan are enough to highlight the alarming situation and its alleged connection with US regional agenda. The Judicial commission has revealed that many international agencies are working in Balochistan and providing arms and training and financial assistance to insurgent group to destabilize Pakistan. The Commandant FC have already revealed that 42 external agencies are deteriorating the law and order situation in Balochistan. He further claimed that among those agencies the RAW is at the top by running over 40 camps in the province.⁵⁸

The Indian presences along the Pak-Iran and Pak-Afghan borders has provided it opportunities to finance conflict in Balochistan and Tribal Districts. Although

Iranian government has assured Pakistan that their soil would never be used against Pakistan but the fact is Indian naval officer and spy Kulbushan Jadhav was operating from Iran into Pakistan. The US has been encouraging India to have a greater role in Afghanistan and thus getting more chances of destabilizing Pakistan. India has opened many consulates along Pak-Afghan border and pumping huge money to dissident groups operating in Balochistan. Links between the Indian spy master Ajit Doval and the IS have already been revealed by international media. The IS' activities along the Pak-Afghan border are cautioning of longer instability in Afghanistan and the neighboring states.⁵⁹With the help of India, the US is willing to kill two birds with one stone i.e., instability in Pakistan and Iran. In order to survive and sustain the onslaughts of the game, Pakistan has conducted many military operations since 2001 and maintained the writ of the state. Since military operations have never been a complete solution so Pakistan government has introduced a comprehensive National Action Plan which included legal, economic, social and political initiatives to eradicate foreign sponsored terrorist activities from the country. These initiatives have brought sufficient decrease in terrorist activities and the lights of major economic hubs have been restored again.

Post US withdrawal Scenario

The new great game is expected to enter a new phase in the post US withdrawal scenario. The US after the 19 years of fighting is now willing to negotiate a political deal with Taliban. While sensing the US weakness, Taliban have already strengthened their position by directly dealing with Russia and China. Beijing and Moscow are willing to reconcile with Taliban demands if they agree to completely eradicate the rising menace of IS in the region. They believe that Taliban would not pose a threat to their interests as they just want to regain power in Afghanistan whereas IS is having a global agenda of terrorism so it could destabilize the whole region. The US is willing to give India a greater role in post withdrawal scenario. Afghan government, perceiving rampant chaos after withdrawal, is requesting to see the Indian army stationed in Afghanistan to provide security to its fragile setup. Several rounds of Doha Talks has brought at least one consensus that Taliban would agree for ceasefire if the US would come up with complete troops pull out plan. With reference to the future of Afghanistan, Indian and the US seem to be in one camp, Pakistan, Russia and China on the other camp. Taliban are the ones with which every stakeholder is trying to secure its vested interests in future. Pakistan knew that its security is directly attached with the peace in Afghanistan. Turmoil over there would result bad and law order situation in Pakistan. Islamabad should use its influence over Taliban for any mechanism through which long term peace could be ensured. Intra-Afghan dialogue could be a viable option where everyone would get share in power as per its ethnic ratio in Afghanistan population.

Conclusion

International relations does no permanent friend or enemy. This very war on terror is proving a double edged weapon for Pakistan. Its can play very vital role in success and failure of the game. Its enemies have tried their level best to make it a failed and default state. In the last 19 years, Pakistan has very successfully undone their every evil design either in the form of insurgencies or international propaganda. Pakistan

has to strengthen its economy and focus more on the national integration. Pakistan has to learn from its past. Balanced relations with major powers would be a useful policy for Pakistan. As a rational actor, Pakistan should continue to achieve its national interest no matter how it comes. China although has been a great friend of Pakistan but it is still a growing economy and cannot go openly against the US nor could fulfill all Pakistan's security and economic needs. Pakistan's opening with Russia is a good sign but it should not forget what Soviet Union did with Pakistan while vetoing cease fire resolutions during the East Pakistan debacle. Economic and political stability should be main priority. Megaprojects like CPEC should not be politicized and must be completed on due time knowing the fact that the adversaries are not willing to see this project being materialized. Law and order situation has been much better but needs continuous work and attention. The great powers rivalry is going to become rough and tough and Pakistan has to be more vigilant with every passing day. Time has come to say enough is enough and Army chief has rightly said while addressing a ceremony on Pakistan's 52nd Defense Day that "Pakistan has done enough in the war on terror and now it's time for the world to do more" (Yousaf, 2017).⁶⁰

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