

REGIONAL GEOSTRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE AND ROLE OF THE CENTRAL ASIAN STATES IN AFGHAN PEACE PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

Central Asian states are situated at the crossroads of Asia and Europe; it is considered the heart of the globe. Great power that controls Central Asian region controls the world. Central Asia is crucial for any global power for its geostrategic perspective. Afghanistan is an essential country in the region of South and Central Asia. Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan are sharing directly long borders with Afghanistan. Central Asian states have close ties with the people of Afghanistan. Afghanistan shares history, politics, language and culture with all Central Asian states. Militant activities in Afghanistan have a spillover effect on the Central Asian states and Central Asian states are worried about the increase in militant activities in Afghanistan. Drug trafficking is another issue of Central Asia's links with Afghanistan. Central Asian states are very keen to bring stability to Afghanistan. Peace in Central Asia passes through Afghanistan. This paper analyses the efforts made by the Central Asian states to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan and the geostrategic importance of Central Asian states.

KEY WORDS: Central Asia, Afghanistan, Geo-Strategic, Spillover, Resources

1. INTRODUCTION

Asia has always remained the central point in the International Arena. It has faced various challenges in the past, but the challenge Asia faced at the beginning of the 21st century was the biggest one and that was terrorism. South and the Central Asian region always took centre stage in world politics. Afghanistan occupies a unique place in South Asia while Central Asia has great importance due to its geostrategic position; Central Asia connects Asia to Europe. Due to its culture, politics and geography, Afghanistan is part of the Central Asian region and the Cars are part of the former USSR. Afghanistan and the Central Asian region share various commonalities like religion, ethnicities and language with the people living in the northern parts of Afghanistan (Rais, 1993). Afghanistan shares a long border with the Central Asian republics. Afghanistan links with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan by land in the north and shares over 2300 km long distance. Central Asia connects Europe and Asia and covers mountains and rivers, but Central Asia is a landlocked region (Batsaikhan &

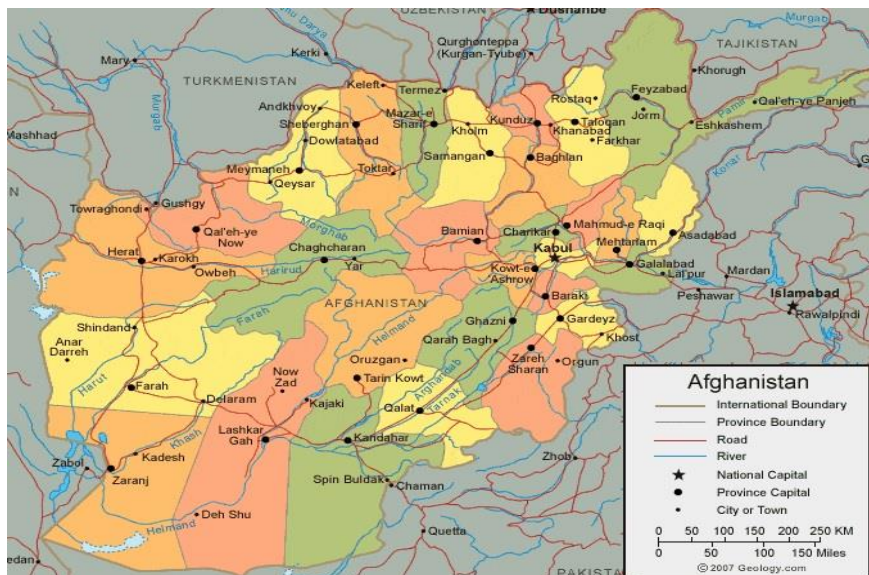
Dabrowski, 2017). The most important thing is that Afghanistan and CARs have occupied the most vital strategic position globally. The central Asian region is rich with untapped reserves of oil and gas, which attract the Great Powers. The incident of 9/11 has changed the security dynamics of the world and especially the South and Central Asian region. The United States of America, with the help of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), toppled the Taliban regime right after the incident of 9/11. Central Asian republics always had feared that the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan would have a spill over effect on the Central Asian states, which had matured in the form of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan into the neighbouring states Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000(International Crisis Group, 2000). Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan had connections with the Taliban to get economic benefits. Afghanistan shares a long border with the Central Asian Republics. Peace in Afghanistan is necessary to bring stability in the South and Central Asian region. Only America cannot bring peace to Afghanistan without the help of regional players. Central Asian states can play a vital role in bringing durable peace to Afghanistan. At the present moment, Central Asian Republics are not in the driving seat. Central Asian states have much to offer in the Afghan peace process. Central Asian states can support peace in Afghanistan by hosting diplomatic talks, by providing political and economic cooperation with Kabul (Hamidzada & Ponzio, 2019). Although CARs have hosted many meetings regarding Afghanistan, in 2018, Astana, Kazakhstan's capital city, hosted a meeting on women's empowerment in Afghanistan. Delegation of several regional states participated in the conference. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are the most critical countries in the region and play an important role in Afghanistan. Kazakhstan, a secular state and the region's biggest economy, has played a constructive role in Afghanistan. However, Kazakhstan does not share a land border with Afghanistan but has excellent economic interests in Afghanistan (Coffey, 2021). Peace in Afghanistan is necessary to explore the untapped reserves of oil and gas in the CARs. Regional powers and world powers are trying to bring peace to Afghanistan. This paper highlights the efforts made by the Central Asian republics to bring stability to Afghanistan. This paper also explains the fears of the Central Asian states due to the destabilization in Afghanistan.

1.1. Study Area

Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan directly share a border with Afghanistan. These states have suffered a lot due to the instability in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has been in war for the last 40 years and Central Asian states are suffering from the people of Afghanistan. Terrorism and drugs are the evils produced by the instability in Afghanistan. This paper analyses the efforts made by the Central Asian states to bring durable

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peace and stability to Afghanistan. Afghanistan shares border with three out of five Central Asian countries.



Source: https://www.nationsonline.org/oneWorld/map/afghanistan_map.htm

2. MATERIAL AND MEETHODS

The author used a qualitative design to complete this research work. The researchers took help from the existing book's articles related to this topic. The writer helped from newspapers and websites to get relevant data. Different well-known scholars helped the researcher to complete his work. Mr. Qamar Cheema is a TV analyst and a writer who writes on the current issues in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Mr. Abdul Basit is a research fellow at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Singapore. Mr. Basit also writes on terrorist organizations working in the South and Central Asian region. Abdul Basit also writes in different prominent newspapers, like Arab News, Aljazeera and South China Post. Ms. Farzana Shah is a Peshawar based journalist and writes on the Afghanistan peace process. Ms. Shah also covers the activities of Tehrik Taliban Pakistan.

2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

Changing Geopolitical Dynamics in Central Asia: Causes and Effects by Sarwat Rauf explain the geopolitical importance of Central Asian states and attempts to hold firm ground by the world powers. America, China and Russia are trying to explore the natural resources in Central Asia. The author tries to explain the tug of war among Beijing, Moscow and Washington in Central Asia. World powers have promised to bring stability to the Central Asian region. Still, the destabilization in neighbouring state

Afghanistan affects the security situation of the whole Central and the South Asian region. After 30 years of independence, CARs are still looking towards partners to improve the security situation in the region. The writer highlights the ties among Central Asian states and the world powers and Afghanistan's role in deteriorating the security situation of the Central Asian region (Rauf, 2017).

Afghanistan Imbroglio: Impact on the Central Asian States by Sajid Iqbal and Sarwat Rauf explains the relation of Afghanistan with the Central Asian states. Peace is directly proportional to prosperity; without a better security situation, the states cannot provide the people's basic needs. The region of Central Asia has surrounded by the neighbours like Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Russia and Iran. These countries have different interests in the CARs. The writers focus on the security situation of Afghanistan and its impact on the CARs. Afghanistan faces different problems: drug trafficking, extremism, migration, terrorism, militant organizations, weak government, and spill over effects are harmful to the Central Asian states. The authors highlight the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Peace building efforts by the world powers to bring stability in Afghanistan and its spill over effect on the CARs discuss by the authors (Iqbal & Rauf, 2019).

Central Asia-Afghanistan Relations under the Shadows of Great Powers Politics by Syed Waqas Haider Bukhari and Prof. Dr. Naudir Bakht describe the ties between Afghanistan and the Central Asian region. Afghanistan and the Central Asian state historically have cordial ties and both are rich in natural resources. There are different projects for the betterment of the people on which cooperation is seen between both parties. Central Asian republics and Afghanistan have grievances on the deteriorating security situation of the region. The writers explain the Great Powers China, America and Russia's role to bring stability in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Beijing and Russia are neighbouring fellows, while America is the foreign actor. The US wants to increase its influence in the Central Asian region. China and Russia have significant concerns about the American presence in their neighbourhood. The authors highlight the wave of competition between China and Russia and Beijing and Moscow share a common platform of SCO to counter American influence in the region (Bukhari & Bakht, 2013).

The Afghanistan Imbroglio: Search for Security and Sustainable Peace by Tauqeer Hussain Sargana, Syed Shahid Hussain Bukhari and Mujahid Hussain Sargana explain the United States change in strategy towards Afghan Taliban. The Afghan war is the longest in the history of America. America and the Taliban have indulged in serious discussions to bring

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lasting peace to Afghanistan. According to the peace agreement both parties must take steps to implement a ceasefire, counter-terrorist activities, withdrawal of foreign troops and all segments of Afghan society sit together to prepare a future roadmap. Afghan Taliban appointed Mullah Ghani Baradar as the chief negotiator from the Taliban side, which is a positive sign. Mullah Ghani Baradar is the most respected Taliban leader after the Mullah Umer in the Taliban rank and file. The writers discuss the demands of the Taliban and the American attitude to end the Afghan war. The draft of the peace deal shows that America is demanding that the Taliban must learn from its past cut ties with Al Qaeda. The authors discuss in detail the peace draft and attitude of the Taliban and the United States to bring peace to Afghanistan (Sargana, Bukhari, & Sargana, 2020).

Taliban (Militant Islam, Oil Fundamentalism in Central Asia) by Ahmed Rashid describes the culture, people, language and different ethnicities in Central Asia. The author explains the history of the Taliban and their support in the masses. The central Asian region is rich with a wealth of oil and gas. CARs have untapped natural reserves and world powers are keen to explore them. Militant activities in Afghanistan have a spill over effect on the CARs. The author explains the Taliban style of government and the popularity of the Taliban in the rural areas of Afghanistan (Rashid, 2010).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The Central Asian States and Afghan Peace Process

The American war in 2001 has ruined a million lives of innocent people in Afghanistan and the People of Afghanistan are still waiting for peace in the country. Neighbouring states are taking their part to end the suffering of the Afghan people. Pakistan and Iran are the most important regional players and trying for peace in Afghanistan. Although India does not share a direct border with Afghanistan, India has increased its influence in Afghan society. China is also taking great interest in Afghanistan and has enhanced its influence in the Afghan community (Ghosh, 2019).

Five Central Asian republics, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan Kazakhstan, are also willing to bring stability to Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan causes two fundamental security challenges to the Central Asian states; the first is the trafficking of narcotics and the second is the Islamic extremism. On the other hand, these states have other goals like rent extraction from America and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) states wanting to get access to the military bases and, in a broader sense, related to energy exports. Central Asian states see the Afghan war from other than Washington, Moscow and Europe (Hill, 2002).

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is one of the most influential militant organizations in Uzbekistan. IMU wants to overthrow the sitting regime and install an Islamic-driven rule. IMU fought against American troops in Afghanistan in 2001. Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan has links with Al Qaeda and the Taliban (Center of International Security and Cooperation, 2018). Afghanistan produces more than 90% of global opium and it smuggles via Tajikistan to China and Europe. Tajikistan is a route for smugglers and most of the population is drug users (Peyrouse, 2018). Turkmenistan is also a victim of narcotics trafficking from Afghan land. Instability in Afghanistan disturbs all neighbouring states and drug smuggling is the most disturbing thing for the Central Asian countries (Burnashev, 2007).

Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan also suffered from militancy in Afghanistan. However, both states do not share land borders with Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan has suffered from the Islamic militant movements inspired by the Islamic Movements Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan is another victim of the Afghan war in the Central Asian region (Krambs, 2013).

The CARs have a large number of untapped natural resources. Central Asian states could not explore their reserves due to the destabilization in Afghanistan. Turkmenistan has one of the most extensive natural gas reserves in the world. Western companies have tried their best to get access to those reserves, but geopolitics is the foremost hurdle of western companies. Afghanistan war is the biggest hurdle in the way to exploring the Central Asian region. Turkmenistan has different projects in pipelines, but (TAPI) is the most important project of Turkmenistan; it connects four countries, including Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India (Mustafa, Junaid, Khan, & Wakil, 2020).

TAPI project is on paper yet; it needs peace in Afghanistan to materialize. Peace in Afghanistan is the ultimate goal to achieve economic prosperity in the region. Turkmenistan shows great interest in the Afghan peace process and TAPI is the prime example. Uzbekistan is also very keen to bring durable peace to Afghanistan. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have much to offer Afghanistan. These three states directly share a long border with Afghanistan; if peace prevails, then trade among these states can change the economic condition of these states altogether. Uzbekistan has been supplying electricity to Kabul since 2002(Kerimkhanov, 2018).

No one can deny the importance of water in the modern world and water is also a prime issue among Central Asian states. Water can play a constructive role in the economy of the CARs. Tajikistan considers water a critical factor in its economic growth, but Uzbekistan has great grievances

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over water use in Tajikistan. Uzbeks think that the use of water for irrigation on vast cotton fields by Tajikistan is a dangerous decision for the people of Uzbekistan (Parshin, 2010).

Water issues among Central Asian states must be resolved in the next few years. Otherwise, things will become worse as far as the water is concerned. There are many issues in Central Asian republics, but one issue harmful to all Central Asian states is the criminal networks. Criminal networks have deep connections within Afghanistan one or the other way and criminal networks threaten the CARs and regional players like Beijing, Tehran, Moscow, and Islamabad. Narcotics smuggling is the most common transitional crime in the region. Smuggling of narcotics has adverse effects on the region. Moscow has publically accused Washington of not taking extreme measures to tackle narcotics smuggling in the region (Quinn, 2020).

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members are much-affected countries due to narcotics. United Nations numbers are alarming regarding the death rate in NATO member countries; approximately 10,000 persons died due to narcotics overdose in NATO member countries (United Nations, 2009). Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are both the victim and beneficiary states of drug smuggling from Afghanistan. It is said that the governments of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are directly or indirectly involved in drug smuggling. Drugs travel from Afghanistan to Tajikistan in such a significant volume that government involvement is undoubted. The most important things are the laws that permit children in Tajikistan to smuggle drugs with indemnity (Aliev & Shohjamolov, 2010).

War in Afghanistan provides safe havens for the militant organizations. Destabilization in Afghanistan has profound consequences on the regional states, especially CARs and Central Asian states are fighting against Islamic militancy, human trafficking and drug trade at the same time. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan seize a significant amount of drugs coming from Afghanistan every year. According to the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), it is a small portion of the overall drug trade in the region. Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are also affected by drug smuggling. Political unrest and a decrease in tourism increase the cultivation of drugs. Law enforcement agencies also back the drug dealers and get money from them. People in Kyrgyzstan grow cannabis to increase their revenues and meet the daily needs that are alarming for the future of the country and the regional countries (Orozobekova, 2005).

Afghanistan is the central hub of drug production and human trafficking. According to the American state department, women are misused in

Afghanistan. Women from neighbouring states, especially Tajikistan, are sexually abused in Afghanistan (Luccaro & Gaston, 2014). Central Asian states are rich with untapped natural resources, but the disturbance in Afghanistan is the big hurdle to resource exploration. Afghanistan's situation has a spill over effect on the CARs. In Afghanistan, the Taliban has been fighting with the American troops since 2001. Northern Alliance supported the American army against the Taliban militants. Central Asian states supported Northern Alliance against the Taliban. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan respectively supported Tajiks and Uzbeks in Afghanistan (Hill, 2001). The Taliban had no presence in the northern parts of the country. The Taliban leadership has changed its strategy and started recruiting members from the Northern provinces linked with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (Bezhan, 2016). Although Tajikistan and Uzbekistan contributed to the war against the Taliban, both states are putting stress on achieving durable peace. Peace is the ultimate goal of all regional players. Peace in Afghanistan not only favours Afghan people but has excellent effects on the CARs.

4. CONCLUSION

The Central Asian region is vital for the world and regional powers. The world needs a large number of energy resources and Central Asian states can fulfil the world's needs. American, Russian and Chinese companies are keen to explore the unhidden wealth of Central Asian republics. Stability in Afghanistan is compulsory to explore the untapped resources of the Central Asian countries. The US and the Taliban have signed a peace deal to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan. Natural resources in CARs are untapped due to the disturbance in Afghanistan and the security, political and economic situation in the Central Asian republics. China, Russia and America are very keen to keep a stronghold in Central Asian states. CARs have faced various challenges like human trafficking, drug smuggling and extremism since their birth in 1992. Afghanistan's internal situation has a spill over effect on the CARs. Although CARs have faced various challenges due to the war in Afghanistan still have no significant role in the Afghan peace process. Central Asian republics can play a vital role in the Afghan peace process because they have much to offer, but still, CARs are in the back seat. CARs have ethnic links with Afghanistan and they can play a positive role in bringing durable peace to Afghanistan and now, the world powers should give a chance to CARs to sit on driving seats to discuss the peace process. America signed a peace agreement with the Taliban in February 2020, but still, there are slight hopes for peace in Afghanistan.

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